

1st Place--Fiction

The Healer

by *Brett Kapaun*

I.

The creaking floor woke Bill from a dead sleep. Glancing at his sleeping wife and child beside him, he suddenly realized that the baby was no longer crying. Quickly, he checked Junior's breathing; the steady rise and fall of the child's frail chest reassured him. Something moved along the wall in the darkness—was it a curtain or someone moving through the doorway? By the time his eyes adjusted to the darkness the room was empty. As he lay there awake he began recalling the evening, just four short hours ago when the rain had started.

The sudden slide and stop of the car jolted his wife awake and their baby in the back seat began to cry. The father, red faced by his stupidity, began to calm his wife, "There is nothing to worry about, we just slipped off the road."

"What can I do to help?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said abruptly, instantly sorry for taking his anger out on his wife. Softening his voice he said, "I'll get out and look at the damage. Maybe I can push us out or something." He shoved open the door and stepped into the long grass of the ditch. The car leaned from the slant; using the top of the car and the door of the Cadillac as a brace he stood up. Angry at himself, William thought how stupid it was of him to leave the cruise on when it was so wet. Walking around the back of the car he noticed the front right tire stuck in a badger hole. "I'll never get us out of there," he muttered to himself. The car seemed to be fine otherwise. He tapped on the passenger window and she rolled it down. "We're stuck. I'll have to walk somewhere to get help. I saw a yard light back a few miles. Stay in the car and keep the doors locked. You better feed William, check him over to see if he is alright. See if you can get him calmed down. I will walk to see if I can get help."

"But Honey you don't know for sure if anyone lives over there."

"I'll be ok, don't worry. Just do something about that crying. Lock the door, close the window and feed him." He leaned in and kissed her and touched the boy's head. There seemed to be a bump forming just over the right temple. "Check him over and I will be right back." He walked out of the ditch, the rain had slowed down to a drizzle. He looked down the road at the distant light and struck out at a quick pace. "An hour and I should be there," he said to himself.

About a half-mile from the farmstead, lights from a vehicle pulled out of the driveway and onto the highway toward him. By now his dress clothes were soaked; he was lucky for the walking, it kept the cold off.

The old beat up Jeep pickup slowed as it approached. He raised his arm to flag it down just as it stopped across from him.

An old man in bib overalls got out and walked around the front of his pickup.

"Howdy there mister, looks like you had some trouble," the old man said with a smile, "My name's George Fieberger," he stuck his hand to shake William's, "looks like yaw need some help?"

"I am extremely happy you decided to stop. My wife and I ran in the ditch a few miles up the highway. Do you think you could help us get out of the ditch with your pickup?"

"Oh sure, jump in we'll go down the road and pull your car out."

They both got in the pickup. It smelled musty, unused, the dash was littered with junk; a .22 rifle leaned against the seat by the gear shift. The old man put the jeep in low and it lurched off. The old man's reflection in the darkened windshield seemed strangely familiar. Lights

reflected from the dash in the old man's face. The headlights weaved down the road. Suddenly the young man felt uncomfortable and spoke nervously. "I forgot to introduce myself. My name is William James Wellington."

The old man said with a smirk, "Well, Bill what are you doing out in these parts?"

A bit taken back—no one had called him Bill since leaving home—he looked over at the old man whose eyes looked bright behind his glasses. "We are on our way down from Minneapolis to a reunion.

The lights from the pickup reflected the tail lights on the Cadillac as George downshifted. He stopped at the side of the road, "Bill, you best check on your wife and I'll have a look around to see the best way to get you out of here."

William ran down the ditch and tapped on the fogged-up window. As his wife opened it, he noticed the red-faced child was still crying. "I don't know what is wrong, he won't stop crying. I tried to feed him. I changed his diaper, but he just won't stop crying. I don't know what is wrong," she said with a panicked look on her face.

William said, "Don't worry Karen, I have an elderly gentleman here that will pull us out. William Jr. is just shook up—it will be fine."

George came down to the open window, "I can hook the chain on the back. I'll be able to get her out of the ditch. We best get movin' before we lose all of our light. Bill, you get in behind the wheel, when I start pullin' you can put it in reverse and we'll get you outa the ditch."

William slid into the driver's seat. George began to pull. The Caddie jerked as the chain tightened, slid back to the spot it rested in, then slid sideways up the ditch to the top of the road. There was an odd sound coming from the right front tire. Once up on the road, George stopped his Jeep, put on his parking brake and flashers, and got out to remove the chain.

"You got problems there Bill."

"Yes, Mr. Fiebeger, I think I have a flat tire."

"You know Bill, you keep calling me Mister, I'm gonna start to think real important of myself. Call me George."

"All right George, what do we do now?"

"Well Bill, we should get your family back to the house, warm you up, get some food in your belly and let you rest up. Then I'll come back and fix your tire. How does that sound to you?"

"George, I can not let you do all this. Your wife is probably wondering where you are at?"

"Bill, my wife passed on 40 years ago, don't worry about that."

William, feeling he should say something, let out a simple, "Sorry to hear that."

George went to the car, helped William's wife and baby out, and showed her to the Jeep. William got in next to her; George turned around on an approach and headed toward home. The only sound that could be heard in the cab was the crying child.

William forgot his manners and said, "Oh, George, I would like you to meet my wife Karen and our son William James Wellington the second."

George smiled "Nice to meet you folks. Bill there said you are on your way to a reunion, where to?"

Mary said, "Denver. That's where I'm originally from." She continued, "William is from western North Dakota, a little town called Rhame."

"Karen, you do not need to tell him everything," glared William.

George shot him a look of disgust. Then asked, "Karen, how old is little Billy?"

"He'll be one in July," she answered rocking the child in her arms trying to soothe him.

"He looks like a strapping young boy. I'm sure he'll grow up to be a good man. So Bill, what do you do for a living in the cities?"

"I am the CEO of the Cargill Company," William said with a tone of arrogance.

“Oh. We used to have a Cargill elevator in town, but that closed about 10 years ago. Everybody seems to want to live in the big city,” George said with a wave of his arm to the east. “You know my wife used to have a sister in the Rhame area. We would go out there deer hunting. They would have a smoker and a dance at the VFW. We always had a good time. I haven’t been back since ’64,” he spoke dejectedly.

“Well, here we are. The house isn’t much but it’s warm and dry. It hasn’t had a woman’s touch for 40 years, so don’t be surprised if you see some dust here and there,” George said embarrassed. “Now you three go in and make yourself at home. There’s food in the ice box and the stove works. Make something for you and Bill and the baby. Maybe that’ll quiet him down some. Bill you go get some old clothes out of the closet, they might fit you. They’re not fancy but they’re dry. Help yourself,” George said as if they were family.

They walked up the steps and opened the door, but stopped and looked back at George, who waved and smiled.

Bill and Mary opened the door to the house and stepped back 40 years. The kitchen was decorated in the 1960’s style décor, old clocks, silver table and chairs, old enamel pots and pans sitting at the wash board by the sink. The kitchen was old but showed little signs of the dust George was so worried about. William laughed with a little disgust. Typical, he thought to himself, all old farmsteads seem the same. He thought of his own youth, the house, no running water, no plumbing, calves and lambs in the kitchen being fed with old pop bottles and rubber nipples.

Karen’s voice brought him back to the George’s kitchen, “I wish little William could tell us what is the matter!”

II.

“Nice couple,” George said as he drove out of the yard with his pickup loaded with jacks and tools to fix their flat tire. As George drove down the road he wondered if the Wellingtons knew his wife’s family out in Rhame.

It had been 40 years since he had heard from any of his wife’s kin. “I wonder what everybody looks like out there,” he said to himself. “To bad about what happened, my Elizabeth had tried her best to help that child. She had done it before; I just don’t know what happened. I guess you and God know don’t you honey.”

George slowed down as he reached the Cadillac. “Awful nice car the kid drives, must make a pile of money. But money’s not everything I guess,” George said as he propped the jack under the front bumper. “I know I couldn’t live in the big city like him,” he commented as the strong hands broke the air-wrenched-tightened lug nuts loose.

George rolled the flat tire around to the back of his pickup. Lifted it and tossed it in the back like the thousands of feed sacks he had thrown in his lifetime. He popped the spare tire on the hub, put the lug nuts back on and tightened them down.

He opened the door to his pickup, looked at the sunset and wished his wife was there with him to see it. “You always loved to watch it set, I still miss you just as much as the day you died. You know if you wouldn’t have been there, you might still be alive to this day. We would have our own family. No, I’m not mad at you, I just wish you were here with me. I’m lonely,” he spoke to her as if she was standing there.

His eyes glistened as he backed into the approach and headed toward the yard. “I know I’ll get to see you in Heaven one day dear. I just miss seeing the real you instead of pictures,” George said tears streaming down his cheeks. He turned into his driveway and parked his pickup in front of his shop. George took out a red handkerchief from his back pocket and wiped his eyes. “Best not let them see the old fool crying by himself. Get a hold of yourself now,” he said to himself. He walked toward his house that was all lit up in the night. It looked so inviting to him that he had to smile and think how his wife would have loved to see the house bustling with activity.

III.

William searched in George's closet for something to wear. He reached instinctively above his head to the middle of the closet for the pull string light. William surprised himself by finding the string and turning on the light. He found a nearly new pair of Levis hanging on a hook in the closet. The single bulb swinging back and forth cast eerie shadows. Just like in the old house, he thought. William found a long sleeve, flannel shirt that looked his size and took it off the hanger. He pulled the string on the light and closed the door behind him.

William saw pictures hanging on the walls; he turned on the light in the bedroom and walked over to get a closer look. One of the pictures was of a younger George and his wife. William thought he should have asked more about her, which would have been the polite thing to do. He looked closer at the picture, the woman looked strangely familiar to him, and he just could not decide where he had seen her before. There were no pictures of children. William figured they had not had any.

Everything in the room looked as if it was bought in the '60's, the bed spread, dresser and the head board. His wife's side of the bed looked as if she still lied there. All the combs, brushes, perfume, lipsticks were neatly placed on the dresser. The scent of the perfume smelled of fresh lilacs. William caught himself smelling the bottle. He breathed in deeply, something about the smell made him smile, it vanished when he caught site of himself in the mirror.

Lights reflected through the bedroom window as George pulled in the driveway. William quickly went to shut the lights off in the bedroom. He did not want to seem like he was snooping around in George's bedroom. William put on the jeans and shirt and hustled down the hallway toward the kitchen.

The front door slammed just as William walked into the kitchen. "I see you found a pair of Levis and a shirt to wear," George said with a smile.

Karen was trying to feed the baby, who had quieted down, but was still fussy.

"Looks like you made yourself at home, that's good, houses are for families," George said warmly. "Well Bill, let's you and me go get that car of yours. I've put the spare on your car. I'll fix the flat when we get back with your car."

"You are so kind, I do not know how we can possibly repay you," Karen said.

"Not to worry, it's just the right thing to do. Come on Bill; let's go get your car."

William and George walked out of the house. The rain had stopped. The sky cleared off and stars were shining bright. "Sure is beautiful out tonight. Huh Bill."

"Yes, it is a wonderful night. I am sorry for all the problems we have caused you tonight George," William said sorrowfully.

"That's not a problem Bill, glad to help you kids out," George said with a smile.

They walked to the pickup and climbed in, George drove out of the yard. The trip down the road seemed especially quiet now that the two men were alone. The tires on the highway seemed to lull Bill to sleep.

George broke the silence, "Your wife said you were from that Rhame area. Whereabouts did you live from Rhame?"

William startled with the question, replied, "My parents had a farm about 25 miles south."

"Is that so, when I used to hunt down there we used to stay at my sister-in-law's ranch. They lived south of Rhame too. I can't think of the name of the ranch, but her husband's name was Walatarski," George said matter of factly.

William shot him a quick glance to see if he was joking. George just kept on driving, never looking over at William. William's mind raced. Did he know? How could he? It can not be the same name. He must have said it wrong. Then he calmly stated, "Oh really."

George was already slowing down for the Caddie, so the conversation stopped at that point.

Jokingly, George said, "Now get in your car and follow me home, no more flat tires."

"I will," William said, not catching onto George's little bit of humor. Once in his car, William began to breathe easier. He started the motor, turned it around and followed George back to his house. He began to run things through his mind. Who is this man? Why does he know my dad's last name? He knew something strange had happened, but what?

William followed George to the front of an old red garage. George was out and in the lighted doorway before William had a chance to even shut his car off. He stopped in the doorway, gazing at the assortment of tools hanging from walls, laying on the work bench, the turning lather, the drill press and finally the large heavy anvil to the right of him.

George had already started working on Bill's flat tire. He had the tire off the rim, and was looking at the inside of it with a trouble-light. "Bill, I think you got lucky. The bead of your tire just popped off the rim. All we have to do is put it back on and put some air into it."

"That's fine," William said, almost in a trance looking at the cold, black anvil. William could see his father standing at the anvil, pounding some red-hot piece of iron, melting it together with other pieces next to it. The hammer rang in his ears, beads of sweat rolled off his father's nose. His large thick arms swinging the five pound hammer like William wields a pen.

His dad looked at him and said, "If you're home from school get out of those good clothes and get your chores done. No time to waste standing around and staring at me."

George rolled the repaired tire over to the Caddie, opened the trunk and placed the tire back in its compartment.

"There you go Bill, all fixed and ready to go," George said with a smile.

"Huh," William muttered, "Oh, yes, can you fix our tire?"

"Well, hell Bill, it's already fixed. Didn't you hear me when I told you about the bead breaking?" George asked. "Come on Bill, let's go see if we can find some supper," he said with an arm wave to the house. William followed numbly, turning to look back at the charred black anvil.

The smell of food hit them as soon as they opened the door. "Looks like your wife found something to cook for us. Sure smells good, doesn't it Bill," George said with a smile.

William looked at his watch; it was 11:30 at night. Where did the time go?

Karen had fixed hamburgers and fried potatoes. The malmac dishes were set on the table. She turned and looked at the men as they came in the front door. George walked over to the sink, grabbed the Lava soap from the dish and washed his hands. "Wash up Bill, so we can have this wonderful meal your wife has made for us," George said.

As if he were in a trance, William washed his hands, walked over to the table and sat in the spot by the window. "I say grace every meal, if you two care to follow along. Come Lord Jesus be our guest, let this food to us be blessed. Amen." George ended.

William chimed in with George like he had said it every day of his whole life. Karen looked at him in amazement and said, "William, I didn't know you knew that prayer."

"Something from my childhood," he grunted.

"Nice to have company for supper, I get tired of eating alone," George said.

"I am sure it is. Tell us about your wife George," Karen asked.

"We never had a chance to have any children," George said as he chewed his food.

Karen said, "That is so sad. How did your wife die, if I may ask?"

"Well," George started to say, "We were out west, in that Rhame country that you're from Bill. We had gone out to see her sister, Tekla. She had just had a set of twin boys. But one of the boys wasn't doing very well so we went to help take care of the healthy one.

William had stopped eating as he listened to the story. George went on to explain, "My wife Elizabeth was staying home with the healthy one, Wesley. Her sister had taken the sickly one into the hospital in Dickinson. My brother-in-law, Joseph and I were out working cattle. We saw smoke coming from the house. We rode our horses over to see what was happening. By the

time we got there the whole house was in flames. The bodies of my wife and Wesley were still in the rocking chair where we had left them. I haven't been back since."

William and Karen just stared at George. They did not know what to say. William knew what he had suspected. Suddenly little William began to wail in the bedroom. Karen and William ran into the bedroom. "Something is wrong with him William, he never wakes this late at night," Karen said with a panicked look on her face.

"Calm down dear—see he is already settling back down," William reassured. He did notice that the bump on the baby's head was larger and blacker now than it was in the car. George came into the room as the baby was still whimpering.

"Why don't you folks lie down next to him, maybe that will calm him down? You both could use some rest, you have had a busy day," George insisted.

"We can not possibly intrude any more than we already have, George," Karen half-heartedly said hoping they could spend the night.

"Nonsense, now go lay down and comfort your baby. Both of you!" George spoke sternly.

William climbed into bed, looking down at his young son, who was weak from all the crying. He thought to himself, how will I ever get any rest with him fussing around like this. Minutes later William was asleep.

The floor creaked as the figure laid a calming hand on the child's swollen head. The baby, no longer suffering, went to sleep. William felt the caress of a hand on his face. He opened his eyes. The woman in the picture moved out of the room with a smile on her face. Bill saw things much clearer now.

Bill and Karen woke to the smell of bacon frying and coffee brewing. The two together walked into the kitchen to see George standing at the stove in what must have been Elizabeth's apron. "Morning," they said in unison.

George spun around with a red-faced reply, "Well good morning you two sleepy heads."

"Things seem a lot better today than they did yesterday," Bill chimed in. "Junior finally got the well deserved rest he needed last night. Bill Jr. was crying and fussing when I was lying next to him. I thought I was dreaming, until I remembered the picture of your wife on the wall in your bedroom. I saw her. She saved our son. How long did you know it was me?"

George smiled and said, "The first time I saw you on the road."

2nd Place--Fiction

Crossing Paths

by *Wes Staton*

I

Ripping a big sniff of the pressboard table, I felt all the blood in my body surge to my head, “God damn that’s some crazy shit!”

“\$200 an eight ball dude,” Doug quickly replied, as he strolled to the fridge to grab a pop. “Can I get you anything?” His fridge was stocked with an assortment of food and different beverages. I could not remember the last time I could offer company a drink.

When Doug opened the fridge I caught the distorted reflection of myself in the chrome of the door. I brushed aside my thin stringy hair to reveal my pure pupil eyes, pointy nose and bony cheeks. “Not bad, not bad—where did you get it again-- And can I have another line?” I asked. Without waiting for an answer I began cutting two ridiculously thick lines for Doug and I, then noticed my right leg twitching uncontrollably.

“Yeah, go nuts.”

I railed down my line and offered the straw to Doug.

“No thanks, I quit using. My mind gets way too whacked out when I’m doing that shit all the time and I get piss tested for my job with the train company. But, either way, it came in from the cities, huge shipment from California via Columbia.”

As Doug spoke I railed down his line and it caused me to lose the feeling in my face. “Fuck yah, I’ll take three.”

“Party, since you’re such a regular customer I will cut you a break on that big of order. How does \$500 sound?”

“Sounds awesome man, awesome!”

Reaching in my back pocket my emaciated fingers dug out a wad of fifty-dollar bills.

“Shit dude, I’m short. Think you could spot me \$100 until next week?”

Doug’s head shot straight back filling his eyes with fire, and he frantically rubbed the crown of his clean-shaven head, my eyes drifted to the floor.

“God damn it Roach, you do this every time! I am trying to help you out by giving you a break and you still have the balls to ask for a front? If your older brother wasn’t in jail he would kick your ass for being a scavenger.”

“Dude, the bar has been slow lately, and customers aren’t tipping like they used to.”

“Maybe you’re not serving like you used to.”

“Doug, I don’t need a lecture on work from you. Ya gonna’ give me the fuckin’ spot or what man?”

“You arrogant punk. Yeah, I’ll give you the spot, but that’s it Roach. I swear to God if your brother didn’t save my neck by keeping his mouth shut I wouldn’t give your scrawny ass the time of day. Here, take this and get the hell out.”

“I’ll be back in a few days.”

Turing out of the dimly lit kitchen and heading to the front door, my mind drifted to the thoughts of my brother that Doug stirred up.

My brother Jared was six years older than me, and since I can remember, my hero. When I was younger I could never wait to be as experienced and cool as Jared; however, when I reached eighteen, I felt exactly as I did when I was twelve. Six years younger, yearning for more of his experiences.

“You’re welcome!” Doug yelled to me as I got to the door.

“Whatever.”

Stepping outside in the midday South Dakota sun I squinted and took a few seconds for my eyes to adjust. My heart was now thumping so rapidly it felt as if it was popping out of my t-shirt, I glanced down to make sure it wasn't. I then noticed my uncut toes poking out of the thong sandals I was wearing, and then saw the latest rip in my jeans and wondered where it came from, “Fuck it,” I thought. “I scored.”

As I bounded down the steps I heard the shrilling screams of youngsters in the neighbor's back yard, glancing over I noticed five boys. Two were wearing baseball gloves and standing guard over garbage can lids 50 feet apart. The other three were attempting to make it from one lid to the other without being tagged out. Without knowing why I suddenly realized I stood at the fence between the two yards, and in particular I noticed one of the youngsters. All the boys were roughly nine or ten, but he was different than the other guys. He was much bigger, not necessarily taller, but stronger. His sandy blond hair almost covered his gleaming eyes, and in the few seconds I was standing there he easily stole three bases. It was obvious he was the leader of the group, the other boys were aiming to tag him out, but he was three steps ahead, mentally and physically. I was like that once, until Jared got a hold of me. Well, at least that is what I blame it on.

The biggest difference between my older brother and my friends' older brothers was Jared was nice to us. Instead of hanging us upside down over stair banisters and abandoning us to ride the public bus to the mall, Jared would introduce us to his friends, let us listen to music with them, and patiently wait for my pre-pubescent date and I to give us a ride home from the early movie. We would have long talks before bed during which I became convinced he knew everything. Perhaps that is why I promised him if I ever got high my first time would be with him. Another oddity about my brother is while older siblings usually encourage their younger brothers and sisters to learn from the mistakes they made, my brother seemed to want company in them.

As the blonde bullet stole two more bases I thought back to how good I was at hotbox when I was younger, but that was a long time ago. Too ashamed to watch the kid anymore I had to go, but I found myself frozen cold. As my heart beat faster my head felt lighter, and attempting to snap myself out of the trance I made a second effort to move my left leg toward my Toyota SUV, but it didn't budge. Panic set in, and my relentlessly pounding heart seemed to explode instantly releasing all of the blood in my body directly to my head. The blue of the sky passed by my eyes rapidly, and the clearness in my vision of the world from my back seemed to reflect, for once, a tranquil state of my mind.

II

Slowly, my vision began to regain focus, but it was hard with the bright lights. In the distance I heard someone calling, “Mr. Roach, Mr. Roach.” Every time I heard the voice it seemed closer. When it felt as if someone was shouting in my ear, my eyes became sharp and I could see a man standing in front of me wearing a white coat. I recognized him as Dr. Aamlid, my family doctor.

“The average human toxicity tolerance to cocaine is roughly one gram,” Dr. Aamlid explained as I slowly came to, “when you were brought in you had approximately four grams in your system. You are lucky to be alive.”

“Gee thanks,” is all I could mutter, it felt as if my jaw were wired shut. Dr. Aamlid can think it was luck, divine intervention, or any other fucked up ideal, but I know I just have a high tolerance.

“Well Mr. Roach, the overdose of cocaine to your system induced your body into a stroke. You should have a full recovery of all your motor skills and nervous system, but you simply cannot continue with the same lifestyle you have been living.” There seemed to be genuine concern in Dr. Aamlid's voice.

“So, how did I get here?” I asked, hoping his talking would take the pressure off me.

“One of the boys next door noticed you collapse,” Dr. Aamlid began, “he told one of his friends to call 911, and hopped the fence and ran inside to get your friend Doug.”

I hadn’t even thought of how much trouble I might have gotten Doug in.

“Doug then administered a steroid shot which got your heart going again, and saved your life.” Dr. Aamlid continued, “Then it was just a matter of waiting for the ambulance to arrive.”

“I see.” I couldn’t think of anything else I could possibly say.

“By the way Mr. Roach, I hate to do this to someone I have know for so long, but I am bound by the hospital to alert the authorities.” Dr. Aamlid’s voice was softer than it had been. “I am to call them when you awoke. Please excuse me.”

When Dr. Aamlid left I could hear the silence in the room. As I lay frozen on my back staring at the ceiling I was again asking how I got here, only now I was asking myself. Once again my mind came back to Jared. When I saw my brother get heavy into cocaine, I told myself there was no way in hell I was going to follow his crazy ass this time—yeah right. Not long after my brother started dealing I was his little monkey boy, hooking up my early twenties buddies with the purest coke within hundreds of miles. In a town the size of Sioux Falls though, it didn’t go unnoticed for long. The F.B.I. pinched Jared, setting him up to sell to an undercover, which is exactly what he did. The dumb ass, he could do coke like it was his job, but selling it was another story. They offered him a deal if he gave names, but he wouldn’t give an inch. Could have saved him ten years of his life; therefore, Doug still takes care of me.

A quick tap on the door interrupted my silent reflection. Without giving me a chance to respond, the door opened.

“Mr. Ian Roach, I am Officer O’Malley,” the portly bald man wearing a suit that looked as if he bought it at K-Mart explained. He then began to read me my rights. Perfect, the only way this fat bastard could catch me is when I’m laying in a hospital bed I thought to myself. If he were arresting me on the street I would stick my tongue out, place my thumbs on my head like horns and say “Nahnahnahna” as I back-peddled away. Yet, for now I’m captive in this building, and even if I attempted to run my muscles wouldn’t allow it.

“You are being charged with being under the influence of a controlled substance,” Officer O’Malley went on to say.

“And?” I asked.

“And your hearing is next Tuesday.” With that he turned and left the room.

That smooth son of a bitch Doug, not only did he save my life, he saved my ass. Being under the influence of a controlled substance is nothing compared to possession of a controlled substance with intent to deliver.

III

When I knocked on Doug’s door a few days after my hearing, I was hoping he would answer, but being associated with a convicted coke user usually doesn’t sit well with drug dealers, go figure. It wasn’t long before the baldhead on top of his muscular frame was shadowing the doorway.

“What do you want?” Doug asked through the door.

“Just came to pay you the money I owe you.”

“You don’t owe me shit; now get the fuck off my porch, and don’t come back,” he said sternly.

“So it’s gonna be like that huh?”

“It has to be, and you know that Roach.”

“Yeah, I understand. Well, I just thought I would let you know I’m out of the game, so it doesn’t really matter anyway,” I said sourly. With that I turned and walked away; forever.

Although I was out of the game and wanted to be, I was bitter. Bitter people I thought were friends

would not talk to me, bitter that I had a stroke at the age of 27, bitter that I had no pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of. Bitter I had all the promise in the world and amounted to this. As I was opening the door to my car I heard a high pitched, yet powerful voice ask, "Hey mister, are you alright?"

I looked up to see the blond superstar of the neighborhood hotbox game standing about 10 yards from me. His shoulders were developed for such a young kid, and he carried them like a man already. In his right hand he held a junior size football, and with his left he brushed the hair out of his eyes.

"Toss me the ball," I requested, avoiding the question out of embarrassment.

He strategically placed the laces how he wanted them to fit in his hand and unleashed a perfect spiral that hit me right in the chest. I caught the ball and started walking toward him.

"Nice toss!" I exclaimed "how old are you?"

"Eight," he proudly responded, "but, I will be nine in a month."

"That is a pretty good arm for an eight year old; did your dad teach you to throw like that?"

"No, I taught myself. I don't have a dad. Well, I do, because everyone has a mom and a dad, but Mom says Dad had to take a vacation for some bad stuff he was doing," he said shamelessly.

The way he talked about it made me think he did not understand completely about his dad, and for how this kid looked I needed to find out more.

"My mom said that you were doing the same thing as my dad the other day-- when you got hurt and we had to call the ambulance."

"Y-Y-Yeah," I stammered, searching for words, as he proved my theory on him not understanding his dad's situation completely wrong. "What's your name kid?"

"Ian," he replied.

"No kidding," I chuckled. The similarities were just getting weirder. "Well Ian, it's nice to meet you, my name is Ian too. Do you know your dad's name?"

The grin on his tan, freckled face stretched from ear to ear, "ummmm, Jared."

I could not believe my brother had a kid. After doing some quick math I realized my brother went to jail shortly before my namesake was born, and was too ashamed to not be raising him that he didn't tell our family. I was in shock, but decided to not let him know who I was.

"Yeah Ian, I was doing some bad things the other day. Were you the one who hopped the fence to help me?" I inquired.

"Yes," he proudly replied.

"Well, thank you for that, you saved my life kid."

"That is what the ambulance man told me," he said with a confused look crossing his face. "Why were you doing those bad things?"

The honesty of kids left me at a loss for words a second time and it took me a few seconds before I could muster up anything. "I don't know Ian. A few days ago, I could have given you a million reasons why; but now I can't think of one."

"My mom says I shouldn't do that stuff because it will ruin my life, and I will end up on vacation just like my dad," the kid boldly stated.

"You are right, it can ruin your life, and I can already tell that you have way too much talent to let it go to waste. So keep listening to your mother." I simply could not handle the situation anymore, and started backing away. "I have to get going," I said. Before I could turn and walk away the back door of Ian's house opened, and in the doorway was the silhouette of a larger woman with shoulder length hair and glasses.

"Ian, you get up here right now!" She hollered.

As Ian ran to the steps and past his mother into the house I could hear her scolding him under her breath. She then turned her attention to me, "You get off my lawn and stay the hell away from my kid. We don't need you around here."

I was sure she knew who I was from the resemblance. In no position to contest, I simply turned and walked toward my Toyota. I couldn't help but think of my own mother, scolding me when I was younger, and I then realized Ian's mom was punishing me a generation later.

When I got into my truck I rolled down the windows and thought for what felt like hours. I devised a plan for how I was going to get my life back, one day at a time. By the time I turned the ignition I felt hopeful for the first time in years. Not only for me, but the idea that my brother has a kid out there, like us, who still has a chance to lead a good life.

IV

"Clear!" the paramedic hollered as he applied the shock to my chest. I am standing outside my body, and I can see everything going on. Doug is standing to the left, violently rubbing his head. The blonde kid is standing behind the paramedics on my right, crying. His friends are glued to the chain-link fence between the yards.

"Clear!" the paramedic yelled again, his voice growing with panic. The two paramedics are discussing their next move; the young man with dark hair thinks they should keep shocking me. The older woman thinks they should get me in the ambulance and to the hospital as soon as possible. I wished I could have a say.

In a heartbeat, or lack thereof, everything became clear to me. I was still playing the same game of hotbox I was playing when I was nine, but now the stakes were higher; and I was still good. However, the only problem with being good at something in which you dangerously swing between two pendulums is you never get anywhere. My life consisted of attempting to advance 50 feet, only to turnaround and retrace the same 50 feet, stuck in a cycle of substance abuse.

As I stand there looking at myself, I realize my epiphany is too late. I can't recover; physically from how much cocaine I just took, and mentally and socially from who I have become. I am a far cry from the eight year old I was, and I am not determined the effort to rediscovering him would be worth the reward.

"He's gone," the older woman said softly to the man.

"Not yet! One more! Clear!" When I did not move the young man conceded, "Damn it!"

"Don't worry about it," the older woman consoled. "He was just another junky anyway."

The Cheetah

by *Angela Uwadiogwu*

Diceman had always told him he was fast.

Now he knew Diceman was right. Diceman was always right in the first place.

“You look useful...”

“...quite strong...”

“But you have a better potential...”

“...you’re fast!”

“You’d be good for running, you would! Imagine how many races you could win!”

With his arms wrestling the winds, his feet for his wings, and his heart beating as fast as the drums of the Bushmen, he felt like a bird. The sandy ground was the cloud which he flew over, and the sun above was forever beyond. He felt the glee, the way his heart soared, the victory in using the power of his legs and his mind’s will, and he knew he would do nothing else but run- run to win.

“*Ole! Ole!* Thief! Thief! Catch him!”

Ever since he was able to walk, running became his obsession. When he first watched the track events at Olympic Games, all in a small colored TV, amidst the crowds in mama Sala’s beer parlor, he knew where he had to reach to be fulfilled. He was going to be gold-medalist for the short distant races in the Olympics, representing his country, doing his Nigeria proud.

He ran as fast as he could. He had to win this race. Even though there were no medals, no cheering crowds, no flag of his beloved fatherland for reverence, no tears of joy, he must win. Yes, even though he was only being chased by men stronger than he, under the scorching presence of the sun, his legs must win. His legs- and no one else’s.

“He’s a thief! Catch him! He’s got my hand bag! Get him!”

His mother named him Dike immediately after he was born. He was told that he gave her a hard time while she was in labor. That was fifteen years ago.

Dike meant many things. Brave one, courageous one, strong willed of heart, man of strength. The Pride of Igbo land.

He never knew his mother, so when Diceman, aided by snickers of the others, told him the name didn’t suit him, he agreed.

“Dike’ is for wimps, trust me. You’re not a wimp, are you?”

“You’re not in Igbo land; you’re in Lagos, man!”

“Lagos is the real Nigeria, not your wimpy Igbo land.”

Laughter.

“Igbo’s are all wimps- you’re not a wimp...”

“...are you?”

Cheetah didn’t know what a ‘wimp’ was, but he didn’t like the sound.

“You ought to be called a cheetah...”

“Yea... Cheetah, cause you’re really fast.”

“Cheetah... Cheetah! That’s what you are!”

He liked the name. It suited him well, just like Diceman said it would. And it suited the gift he had. It was a good match, he and this new name of his. *Dike* could hover around Igbo land for all he cared. He was no longer in his home, he ran away to Lagos to make his fortune, and he was going to do so, with or without his name.

Today he was doing his new name proud. He was running.

He held the handbag under one armpit—not his hands. Those had to be used against the winds with his arms. It seemed impossible to run with both arms while holding something as large as a handbag under his armpits, but this he did with ease.

“Eewu! Chi mo! My handbag!”

Cheetah laughed. The other guys running after him were wimps, idiots.

Dikes.

They didn’t know how to run. He hurdled effortlessly against the dustbins, broken chairs, broken bottles—every obstacle on the floor of the sidewalk, and he did do it good. The other guys were still far behind, sluggish as tortoises, all of them. He sped past the unknowing pedestrians before they could put two and two together.

“*Ole! Ole!* Thief!”

He ran across the street, just before a green Volkswagen truck could have hit him—to the backyard of the uncompleted building beside the Pentecostal church. His finishing line.

The backyard was the secret entrance to a farm. Diceman and his gang didn’t know who farmed there, and they didn’t care. The paw-paw trees and uncut grasses served as a sort of shade for them, hiding them away from the outside, so their plans could be plotted in peace.

Cheetah stopped to catch his breath. He breathed quickly, heavily—but he wasn’t tired. In fact, he wanted more. When he calmed down, he became aware of the presence of someone else in this secret meeting place. It was the boss, Diceman himself.

He stared at Diceman, fast asleep on a wooden bench. The others weren’t back from their duties, so he was alone. He only wore knickers and rubber slippers. His wide, black bowler hat covered his unconscious face, but that was as far as it went. His chest was exposed, revealing his hairy sweaty skin—a perfect playground for the buzzing flies around the place. He slept quietly. Diceman never snored.

“Diceman!” Cheetah called.

Diceman stirred a bit but didn’t wake up.

“Diceman!”

No answer. Cheetah drew nearer to him and tapped him on his shoulder.

“Diceman!”

Immediately, a firm, strong hand clasped Cheetah’s wrists.

Diceman was awake.

Diceman rose from his bench, just like a zombie, his hat fell on his lap, revealing his wide and alert hazel eyes as Cheetah watched, his mouth open in awe and admiration.

Diceman laughed. “So you’re back, eh?” His eyes were still wide. Diceman opened his eyes like that often, just to scare people. But it worked. It always scared everyone. Eyes as bright as his were scary if they were wide open.

“What did you bring then, Cheetah man my boy?” He let go of Cheetah’s wrists.

The hand bag was still tucked under Cheetah’s armpit. He took it off there and showed it to the boss.

“Give it here!” Diceman commanded. His eyes grew wider at the sight of the bulging handbag. Placing his hat back on his head, he licked his lips in anticipation. Cheetah gave the bag to his boss.

The bag though small in size, was fat. Green, diamond studded at the sides, it was a good catch for the typical artful dodger. Diceman unzipped it and emptied its contents on the sandy ground.

He rummaged through the accessories, his fingers picking up and through business cards, address books, biros, handkerchiefs, a diary, little, meaningless papers, sanitary pads. But something was still missing.

“Where’s the money purse?” He asked Cheetah. He smile vanished, and his eyes narrowed. This proved more frightening.

“It’s not there?” Cheetah asked uncertainly, his heart beating fast.

“No you idiot! If it was, I wouldn’t ask you about it.”

Cheetah held his breath. He was afraid Diceman would get up from his seat and hit him in the face, like he did the others.

“I’m sorry Diceman,” was all he could say.

The boss sighed. He lowered his voice, “At least the bag looks good, we can make do with that. Amazing how ladies here store rubbish in their bags. Look at all this junk! Money’s the real reason why a bag is made in the first place, and there’s none of it here. Now, if it were London, it would be a lot different, it would!” He widened his eyes again.

London. The city of nightlife, clubs, girls, and dosh. That was how Diceman described it. Cheetah didn’t know if Diceman had been there, although the way he talked and acted implied that he had. He spoke exactly like the *Oyinbo*, or as he corrected Cheetah sometimes, the white man. Still, his accent wasn’t hard to understand like the real white people—and that really made Cheetah wonder if the boss was really from London. Almost everything he said was easy to understand. Besides, if he were really from London, why did he leave that grand place and descend to Africa, Nigeria, in the slums? That was the greatest mystery about him. Cheetah spent most nights thinking about that, trying to come up with an answer for the mystery. Despite all this, Diceman’s other qualities made his doubts melt away.

The Skin was one. Diceman almost had the Skin. It was gold, rather than pale, but it turned red when he was slapped too hard, or when he was angry. The girls at the beer parlors liked him because of his skin, and he even made them like him more with he called his *Smooth operations*. Diceman usually tipped his bowler hat in greeting when he saw the girls, and they’d giggle because they thought it was strange and *gentlemanly*. To cap it all, he was tall, with lean muscles and a wide mouth. Cheetah wished he were like Diceman sometimes. Compared to his thin frame, extra dark skin, and typical black eyes, Diceman was a god.

At least, he had running legs. Even Diceman couldn’t run as fast as he did. He admitted it to Cheetah once.

“Even I couldn’t throw a pace like that!” He exclaimed when he saw the dark boy scale through a fence as he raced against the other boys in the gang for his amusement once. Those words had made Cheetah’s day. The boss appreciated his one gift, and that was important.

But running wasn’t in Diceman’s good books today.

He looked up from the stuff on the ground and stared at Cheetah; with that wry grin he always loved having on his face “Well then, I forgive you—partially.”

Cheetah was puzzled. “Partially?”

Diceman nodded his head. “Yea. If the boys return, and they have no loot, I’ll let you off the hook. If they do come with loot...”

Cheetah strained his ears to grasp the remaining words.

“...you’d have to go and catch another one, I’m afraid. I’ve got to be fair to my folk, and you all have to get equal loot at the end of the day, so that’s what I’m thinking.”

Cheetah said nothing to that. He didn’t care for the money, or the tricks of the trade. He just wanted to run, and if going up again to snatch another one promised that, he would be glad to do it again. It perfected his running skills.

The thieving game was like training for him, and besides the fact that he was homeless and penniless, he joined Diceman’s gang so that he could have a reason to run, even though it was running for the wrong reasons. That was probably why he never pick-pocketed. He snatched heavier things, handbags, so that the victim would see him—so that people would pursue him quickly. He often envisioned running from a group of policemen, or the other guys that loved chasing him after he stole, and being watched by a sportsman of sort who would discover his talent on the open road, because he outran the others. The sportsman would then lurk around so that he could have a glimpse of the young talent, ask people about him—and when he finally

found the talent, at the backyard with Diceman and the remainder of the boys, he'll tell him how good he is, and how better he would be serving his country in another part of the world. He would then lead Cheetah to his luxurious limousine, and the young talent would be off to serve his homeland in the Olympics.

Just then, He heard footsteps, fast footsteps.

Diceman yawned. "It's the twins. I'd know their ratty scurries anywhere."

And he was right, as usual. The two short boys, Taiye and Kehinde, rushed into the scene. Their shirts were brown from their sweat and dust. They were breathing hard too—just like Cheetah did when he first came in.

"What did you guys obtain?" Diceman asked them. He widened his hazel eyes.

Taiye Spoke up first. "Kehinde look for my trouble, so I go my own way, ask him first Diceman!"

"That one na lie! Taiye blow me for head, and then he run away, and I vex because my head pain me--"

"Shut up you two!" Diceman bellowed. "What did you guys bring—give it all to me!"

At first, Cheetah had wondered why the boss had eight-year-old twins as part of the gang. Now, he seemed to realize why. The way they acted, how they talked, the seeming unawareness of their brown, pudgy faces all seemed to suggest a certain kind of innocence—an innocence that covered the rascals in them. They were the best pickpockets around. Their small size was an asset; they were able to hide among the crowds and do their thing with ease.

"Well?" Diceman enquired.

The twins dug into their pockets hurriedly. They gave their loot up to the boss.

Diceman went through the stuff. Gold wristwatches, bracelets of good value, five hundred Naira—not bad.

"Good job." He smiled and widened those eyes more. Cheetah wondered then if Diceman's eyes ever had a stretching point.

The twins laughed.

The others came too. Tincan, the plump one with the missing front tooth arrived first among them.

"What did you bring?" Diceman asked.

Tincan brought out what he obtained from his little sack. Two thousand naira and some gold necklaces was what he had.

"Very good." Diceman nodded his head.

The other two, Pluto and Cleverness, came together soon after

"I hope you both did your jobs too?" Diceman asked

Pluto laughed, showing his brown teeth. "Trust me, I do my job well, well." He brought out the rings and bracelets from inside his dirty shirt.

"And money?"

Cleverness smiled, "I handle that one." He brought out his own bag. Opening it, he revealed a fat bundle of red notes.

"Good!" Diceman took it all and laughed.

"Good! All good!"

"You all are my best, my weapons, my special people!"

Everyone except Cheetah laughed. Diceman motioned for all to sit on the ground. He was like their teacher now, and they his students.

"You... you don't get to sit Cheetah," Diceman said.

Cheetah watched as the others sat.

"Well, they got a lot of loot." Diceman continued "In fact, too much of a lot for me to forgive you."

Cheetah said nothing.

“You know what to do.” Diceman said, pressing his bowler hat nearer on his head.

Cleverness asked Diceman. “You mean he no get loot?”

The others laughed.

“Cheetah no get loot!”

“Na only run he wan do!”

“Na only run he know!”

“Runny! Runny!”

“SHUT UP ALL OF YOU!” Diceman bellowed.

Silence.

Diceman continued “You know what to do. I don’t have to tell you again, do I?”

Yes. Cheetah knew what to do.

“I’ll get loot!” He said determinedly.

“That’s the spirit!” Diceman praised him. “Well, hurry off now. The sun’s about to set and we gotta make plans on what to do with what we have quickly enough. Besides, with the amount of money we have right now, we could afford mama Sala’s tonight. You don’t want to miss mama Sala’s, do you?”

Mama Sala. Hot rice and fish stew. A bottle of stout. Pretty Nkechi smiling down at him from the counter, talking to him, making him feel like a grown up man.

No, he didn’t want to miss that.

“One last thing,” Diceman called after Cheetah as he was about to leave.

“Yes?” Cheetah asked.

“Do run good, eh?” Diceman widened his eyes and laughed.

Cheetah left the backyard. The others watched him in silence.

He was back on the street, beside the Pentecostal church. The road was still busy, just the way he had left it. People acting as if nothing happened, as if he didn’t steal from them before. It was always like that, business as usual.

He crossed the street and walked upward to the market.

The market was where he liked to steal from. It was open, full of rowdy, fast runners and many hand bags. Meat sellers, vegetable sellers and peddlers were everywhere. The sun was setting fast, and there were still that many people. This wasn’t too good.

Cheetah liked running against other men, but when there were too many of them, his chances of winning were lower. He shrugged this thought off. He’d probably win again, like he always did.

“Come buy meat!”

“Kote, ice fish!”

“Come and buy!”

Cheetah searched round, trying to find a good bag.

And there it was.

It wasn’t leather. It was waterproof, but it was a good, big bag. Black and square shaped, hanged on the shoulder of its equally huge owner, it looked promising.

The owner looked like she could have something in her bag. She wore good *Ankara*, and she was very robust and healthy looking. Besides, she was haggling over the price of a huge fish with a seller. Yes... the bag was good enough. It was time to run again.

He walked toward the woman and the bag, hearing conversations of the bargain.

“This fish no big like that.”

“Ah ah madam! My fishes are big, this one is big. Seven hundred is too small an amount for it. I’m just giving it to you for that price because you’re my customer!”

“I say four hundred.”

“Madam, put some more money on top of that.”

“Four hundred!”

“Oya, Six hundred is what I can give you.”

“No, no.”

“Madam, please price this fish well—”

Cheetah snatched the bag and ran fast.

“Ah! My bag! My bag o!” the owner wailed.

“Ole! Ole! Thief! Catch him! Catch him!”

Cheetah used the might of his legs. Running quickly, he felt like a bird again. He hoped that sportsman was watching him, because he was outrunning the others.

Or was he?

He was hearing strange, unusual footsteps close behind him.

The footsteps were fast.

“Yes! Yes! Catch him!”

Cheetah quickened his pace. He must win. He had to win

Those steps were still coming on fast.

A hand clasped his shirt.

“Yes! We don catch am!”

Another hand clasped his shirt. Then another, and another.

Soon, a fist landed on his face, hitting him hard on his cheek.

They were many hands and fists now. Hitting, clasping, dragging.

“Thief! Thief!”

That little thought was right—there were too many people tonight.

But it wasn't the hitting and yelling that made him cry with pain. It wasn't the bag being snatched back from him.

Someone caught up with him. He didn't win the race like the other times. He lost.

His legs were no longer the mighty wings again. He was no longer the cheetah.

He was Dike again. That sportsman must have been laughing in contempt by now.

A young man ushered the constable into the meat seller's section of the market. The policeman's wandering eyes fell upon the sight of the bloodied boy. The boy was on the ground, towered over by other young boys his age and older. Some of the boys were hitting his head and showering curses on him. He looked young, sixteen probably. God knows, the constable was never good at calculating ages by just looking at his subjects. The boy was crying, muttering something about losing and a dice.

“All right all of you! Clear up, disappear from there!” He bellowed. When the boys reluctantly let the wounded boy alone, he drew closer to him. Some of the onlookers shook their heads in pity, the others just for the fun of it.

“What's your name?” The policeman asked.

The boy sniffed his nose, tears still fell from his eyes.

“I say wetin be your name! Abi you no understand English?”

The others still watched on as the boy said something under his breath.

“I no hear you! Speak up!” The constable barked.

“Diko,” the boy stammered.

“Omo Igbo!” Someone from the crowd shouted. Hisses, curses, shouts.

The policeman eyed the boy for a while, sizing him up, wondering if arresting him was of any use. Who would bail him? There would be no monetary gain from this one apparently. Thieves his class wouldn't give good cash. Or would they? He came to a resolution.

“Oya, you boys, carry am go station.”

“Make we carry go!!!” A voice from the crowd yelled.

There were hails from the boys, but the others walked their way and carried about their business as if nothing happened. The boy was lifted up from the ground and dragged toward the direction of the station, which was not so far if one walked fast enough.

Quick thoughts ran through the constable's head as he walked amongst the boys. He would release the boy the next day- he just ordered that the boy be carried to the station to avoid anymore trouble or violent outbreak in the market. Before the boy was to go however, he would be tortured to tell all about himself, just in case he had a master or gang of some sort organizing this business of thievery. If he did happen to have a master like so, then things would go better. Money would definitely be part of this. He hoped the money would be good, he hadn't received many bribes of late.

Everyone seemed to obeying the law these days.

A Couple of Hells Too Many

by *James Nyland*

Used to be, in the day, when he still walked around in an actual body, “Hell” was really bad Chinese food. Not just “make-it-10-pounds-at-a-time, all-you-can-eat-buffet” bad. We’re talking “right-off-the-interstate, former-Country-Kitchen, run-by-a-Pakistani-couple” bad. For God’s sake, they couldn’t even cook their own food right! When you walk in to a place and see one of them hovering over a wok making Moo Goo Guy Pan, you knew for a fact you were in for a 4 Tums kinda night. Man, *that* was “Hell”. Or so he thought, until he actually got there. Of course, he didn’t really think anymore, what with lack of anything physical to think with, but during those lull, those short metaphysical down periods when his essence swirled languidly in something he could call “neutrality”, he realized whatever or whoever ran this place was truly one sadistic S.O.B. He thought he’d been a heatless bastard in his time but this was really cutting utter cruelty down to a science. He marveled at the way he could understand completely what was happening every single time and still feel utter despair, numbing terror, and personal emptiness that yawned like a great canyon, every single time. He felt sorry about the terrible life he’d lived, the people he had hurt, the lives he’d ruined. Not out of any sense of compassion or because he really cared for another human being in the slightest but because it, of course, his past behavior led to this “place”. It make him yearn for the sweet, all encompassing ecstasy of eating really, *really* bad Pakistani-Chinese food.

But the thought, if that’s what it was, would have to wait because the neutrality began to stiffen. The feel of flowing blood and living nerves began to make actual thoughts swim, and nothingness turned to darkness...

Again...

Pitch swirled in languid eddies, changing slowly to gray, and finally to the speckled brown of very cheap carpeting. An old, poorly maintained flat topped roof and a rainy Spring had made for a lot of water seepage, so the sunshine coming in the double paned windows flowed through a layer of dense saturated air and desk legs, creating a swirling, criss-cross rainbow on the low pile. His nose was very close to the floor and he made out the sharp smell of rubber, the mildness of grass, and intruding from nearby, the acrid nasal pinch of someone pissing their pants.

He could hear it too, which struck him as rather odd considering. Even though the sobbing and moaning and muttered prayers, he could make out the light hiss of urine urgently flowing through heavy denim, and the fact that it came through so clear at a moment like this made him laugh.

Until the liquid warmth widening from his crotch started turning icy cold.....

...and the gunshots started getting closer.

He raised his head until it bumped hard on the bottom of the desk and he winced as a screw head bit into his scalp. He looked down at his hands. Chocolate brown this time and strong, with the scrapes and calluses of rough use. Ducking his head, he looked through the loose weave of a football jersey, purple with gold lettering. A backward “76”. A lineman. That never helped in the past but who could tell. The acidic dampness on this thighs was starting to sting, and he was just reaching down to separate the wet cloth from tender skin when pounding footsteps ending at the classroom door. There was a sharp ‘bang’, a final gasp, and the thump of a body sliding into the base of a locker. The sound sent a new uncontrollable surge of terror through him, conversely tightening muscles and loosening bowels, making escape from the stench and cold officially impossible. Mixed with it was the insanely rational thought that whoever it was, they must be a hell of a shot.

Heavy deliberate footsteps mixed with a dull, low moan. There was the thin rattle of something empty and metallic hitting the floor, followed by a trio of sharp ‘snap’s, one followed by two in quick succession. Finally two loud claps of thunder as heavy lead slugs fired through a prone body slammed into a hard linoleum floor and the moaning abruptly stopped. The air hung deathly still for about a half a minute. No noise at all came from the hallway and the figures cowering on the floor with him seemed to turn to stone, not breathing, not moving as a deadly presence waiting one door width away.

“Tick, tick, tick, tick,…”

“…snick…”

A knob turned, gears clicked into place, and the door came open with a muffled snap. The slightly different air pressure in the hallway created a outward draft, and a low moan seemed to rise from the room and escape with it. Raising his eyes to a point just over the edge of the desk, he saw a rather small figure framed in the doorway. The boy’s age was difficult to tell because he was short and horribly thin. The multi-colored sunlight played over the killer so the splatters of blood weren’t evident until he took two steps into the room. His expression was an emotionless half sneer. His plain white t-shirt ran with sweat and smears of red stained the chest area where he’d wiped splash-back absently from his face. He took in the room with a look like ice on the back of your neck

In a show of suicidal bravery that was becoming all too familiar, a man got up from his knees and stepped toward the boy, hands held wide. His hair was thick but starkly gray and he was dressed in a natty sports coat and tie. He called the boy Brian and spoke to him in a tone that was surprisingly sort and gentle. A black, heavy caliber semiautomatic pistol hung loosely at the end of the boy’s stick-like arm and he tapped the barrel rhythmically against the side of his leg as if to the beat of familiar unheard music. The calm words seemed to get through for a moment and the boy’s face softened, the tapping stopped. Apparently emboldened, the teacher took a slow step forward and the soft-faced boy named Brian deliberately raised the weapon and fired three quick rounds into the man’s chest, collapsing him to the floor like a bad of wet sand.

Primal, uncontrollable terror now held sway over all but one tiny corner of the room. Amidst this river of fear, a beautiful brown haired girl calmly sat at her desk, eyes closed, hands folded in silent prayer. Brian walked to her side, pointed the gun at her head and asked “Do you believe in God?”.

She never looked up, never separated her clasped hands, never opened her eyes. She simply tilted her head up slightly and said “Yes”. In reply, Brian shot her once in the forehead. As her body slumped out of the chair to the floor, the boy turned and scanned the room. Eyes jolted away for a moment as the first whine of sirens melted through the windows, but then he looked back urgently, panning until his gaze stopped abruptly and his face hardened. Great. He’d seen the jersey. The jersey always did it. The wail of sirens was now quite plain, stripping all pretense from the killer’s actions. He took three quick steps, pushed the desk to the side, and roughly pressed the gun’s barrel to the crouching figure’s temple.

The last thought was that it felt like being poked with a hard metal straw…

Again…

Then darkness…

Again…

….swirling into muddy gray. He could see motion in front of him and blinked his eyes to clear the murk. A tall blonde boy was running away down the hall. Before the image had framed itself within a conscience thought or desire, an arm came up, extended to its full length, and a shot hammered into the running figure’s back. Forward momentum and the kinetic energy of the bullet threw the figure off of his feet and sent him sliding into the lockers at the end of the hall.

“My name is Brian”, he thought as he lowered the gun, ejecting a spent ammunition clip as he walked “and they deserve it. They all deserve it for what they did to me!”. Brian came to a stop

standing directly over the moaning figure. He was a handsome boy. Even the grimace of agony and fear couldn't mask that. The girls must love him, everybody's favorite, no doubt. Another disjointed memory crept in of the same face, hovering, taunting, laughing, snarling. Then, the vision was blurred by tears of shame and embarrassment. A new clip snapped home, Brian chambered a fresh round, and fired two shots almost nonchalantly, unaware of the warm stickiness that flew up into his face or the unconscious act of wiping it away with his shirt.

Of course, the anguish didn't stop. It simply changed and grew. A bubble of rational thought hovered fully aware, fully terrified, fully revolted by what was happening. It was surrounded by a restraining armored shell of hate, and was completely powerless to do anything but suffer. He lingered for a few moments, trying to at least breathe and think without the ragged pain, both mental and emotional, but it wouldn't work. It never worked. He opened the door and came face to face with a kind-faced old man. Warmth and love surrounded this one. A smile filled his face and his arms went wide. Soft words made Brian remember moments of reassurance, of being talked through despair, and he realized this was the only person in his entire life that had ever showed him kindness or compassion. Then the old man stepped forward and before a word left his mouth or a hug could be given, he fell to the floor with three bullets in his chest. The smile never left his face.

The shell of hatred seemed to harden then, and escape or influence became impossible. So, he could only hover in the middle of the sick loathing as his eyes filled with the angelic vision of a praying girl. The sight was gas to an emotional flame and the gun came up again. Inside the shell he heard a voice, his voice bitterly mutter, "Do you believe in God?".

"Yes".

Firing the gun was pure reflex, an act completed by a mind that had spiraled down to another level, totally devoid of humanity. The sight of the flaccid, lifeless body mixed with the faint sound of sirens, and a crack appeared in the shell. The end was near now. Better to speed it along than to linger. Moving quickly, as if running out of time or control, eyes frantically scanned the room for a splash of color. Find the easy kill. Get this over with. There. Gold on purple. Three quick steps and toss the desk aside. A jock, and black. For some reason that was perfect. Why, he did not know. Gun to temple, squeeze gently, and the wall suddenly came crashing down. The siren wailed now but he did not hear it. The blood was sticky on his face and hands but he did not feel it. He had control now and he tried to stem the flood of disgust and horror and self-loathing and pain and as usual could not. The feeling pressed down on his soul like a fly smashed between two strong fingers, and he ended the feeling with the only way left to him.

A metal straw pinched. The gentle finger.

Then darkness....

Again....

.....gray mixed with vibrant green and ended with the brown of jungle mud. He blinked his eyes to clear...rain? When he tried to look at his hands, he realized he could not and the burning pain of having his arms wrenched shoulder high and trussed tightly around a metal pole behind his back eased into his awareness. There were voices, the snap of an automatic weapon bolt, and he knew what was coming for him....

Again....

The Polite Murders of Macadamia

by Justin Stangler

General Applesby- a General in the army. He has a uni-brow.

Mr. Maslow -A well to-do socialite. No reason for living except for tea parties.

Mrs. Madeline Maslow - A well to-do socialite obsessed with her own ostentation.

Dr. Dandy –A doctor of high philosophy.

The Butler- Loyal servant of the Count.

Count Macadamia -The owner of Macadamia Manor.

Countess Macadamia-Estranged wife of the Count.

Setting: Macadamia Manor in North Southhampshire . . . the suburbs. It is the late evening at a tea party.

Mrs. Maslow- I inspire. If you could only see the look of inspiration in their sad little eyes as I walked through their impoverished little borough. It was painfully obvious none of them had seen gold and ruby. After I graciously accepted their admiration, I left knowing that I inspired them. I have no reservation to think, indeed, that one day one or two of them will rise up to become the next Thomas Edison or Van Gough. As one of God's devout, I shall take very little pride in knowing I have helped accelerate humanity's finer qualities. Little at all!

Count Macadamia: Here, here!

Mr. Maslow: Indeed! Brilliant story, Madeline. Oh how we do adore your stories. What say you, general?

General Applesby: I thought the plot rather weak but a gainful sense of entertainment held true for the duration.

Dr. Dandy: You must excuse the General. He has a reputation for speaking immoderately. I did so thoroughly enjoy your story, Mrs. Maslow. In fact, if the tea holds out, I should like to spend the next hour heaping praise upon your tantalizing anecdote.

Count Macadamia: Here, here!

Mrs. Maslow: Most kind, Dr. Dandy.

Mr. Maslow: I have a story to tell. (Covers his wife's ears and she continues to sip her tea blissfully unaware) It was the most appalling dream. I was at a place of money exchange and was in need of unsanitary paper money. I was waiting in line to cash a . . . paycheck!

Dr. Dandy: How crude!

Count Macadamia: Here, here!

Mr. Maslow: It does not end there. This coarse woman then asked me to sign my name but I knew not where. I grasped the pen as my hand nervously fumbled and flailed about. I woke up in a cold

sweat and had to summon Robere to hot oil massage my earlobes to rouse me out of bed. (Takes hands off wife's ears and she continues to sip her tea)

General Applesby: Absolutely horrible.

(Butler Enters)

Butler: Additional tea anyone?

Mrs. Maslow: I would adore some.

General Applesby: Yes, please.

Butler: Count?

Count Macadamia: Here, here!

(A thud is heard and the lights briefly flicker)

Dr. Dandy: Oh my, how queer was that?

Mr. Maslow: Quite!

Mrs. Maslow: Butler, is there an electrical malfunction? Is there anyone else in this house?

Butler: Not at all. We are the lone inhabitants. I can assure you the electrical workings are in order as I checked them this past month. This manor is old and has seen many men great and old. Perhaps it was a ghostly specter.

Dr. Dandy: A dim-witted ghost!

Mr. Maslow: Dim-witted ghost?

Dr. Dandy: Well, was there one among you who experienced apprehension? Fear? Anxiety?

General Applesby: No.

Mrs. Maslow: Not at all. As a matter of agreement it was quite queer but my temperament remained even.

Mr. Maslow: And for you, Count?

Count Macadamia: . . .

Dr. Dandy: Precisely my point. The specter in question failed miserably. A half witted attempt. It has most likely spent its unnatural existence sauntering about the manor engaging in its half-witted monkeyshines.

Count Macadamia: Here, here!

General Applesby: Perhaps you can inspire this idiot spook to greatness with your pearls and finery, Mrs. Maslow.

Mrs. Maslow: Oh, you rogue!

(Lights go completely out)

Mr. Maslow: Offense! Offense! We spoke too soon!

Mrs. Maslow: I cannot distinguish my cup!

Dr. Dandy: Unhand my dickey, madam.

Butler: Count! Where have you gone?

Count Macadamia: Here, here!

(A thud is heard. Lights come back on and the Count is lying on the floor motionless)

Dr. Dandy: (Notices the Count) Oh my word!

Mr. Maslow: The Count!

Butler: (Feels his wrist for a pulse) The Count . . . is dead!

Mrs. Maslow: Most horrible! I now drink a dead man's tea! Out of politeness, though, I feel I must finish. Rudeness does not end with the grave. (takes a leisurely drink)

Butler: Everyone stay where you are. You are all suspects!

Dr. Dandy: It could not be me. I am a man of peace and have not the innards for such an act. I can not even use a contraction in my speech!

Mrs. Maslow: Most strange!

General Applesby: What now?

Mrs. Maslow: My checkbook. In my purse I felt it of even keel. Upon further perusal I find it to be perfectly balanced. (Holds the checkbook in her hand) T'was not so when I left my home.

Mr. Maslow: Huzzah! If not for the Count's death, I would find the means to rejoice.

Butler: The poker lying by the body would indicate the tool of the murder. The lights went out and the murderer grabbed a poker from the fire place and extinguished the fair Count's life.

Mr. Maslow: How awful, to think we are in the same room with a brutal beast!

Dr. Dandy: I contend suicide.

General Applesby: The man hit himself dead with his own poker?!

Dr. Dandy: Indeed. We all knew the Count to be a man of capricious moods, prone to fits of melancholia. He simply picked tonight to commit the act as the most dedicated host and showman would. I, for one, am highly entertained and applaud the dead Count's dedication. Let's all applaud and call our cars around, shall we? Come along all, there are fresh crumpets at the Duke of Lysol's manor. (Applauds briefly and makes a play for the door)

Butler: Make no haste, doctor. Your salty intellectual opines are not sufficient to deliver you from suspicion. Take heed of Mrs. Maslow's example. Have a seat and finish your tea. First, we must examine motives. Which of you stood to gain the most from Count Macadamia's death?

General Applesby: Being a military man I prefer to pacify my foe face to face.

Butler: Mrs. Maslow?

Mrs. Maslow: Me? How silly an idea! Everyone knows I adored the Count.

Butler: There is no doubt of your affections for the count. There is also no doubt as to the debt you have incurred over the years of adorning yourself with so many riches.

Mrs. Maslow: I will not withstand further insult. I demand you refresh my cup.

(The Butler fills her cup with tea)

Butler: As all of you know the Count has considerable wealth derived from his nut plantation. What you don't know is the generous Count's inclusion of Mrs. Maslow in his will.

Mrs. Maslow: I had no such idea. The time I've have spent with the count only involved drinking tea while watching him lecture his menagerie of cockatiels about the laws of supply and demand. He never mentioned a will.

Butler: Lies! We are on to you, Mrs. Maslow.

Mrs. Maslow: Poppy cock! I am now greatly offended and my cheeks are now flushed. My complexion is ruined! I implore you to put a napkin under my cup lest I spill on the table.

Butler: (In a polite manner) Most assuredly, madam. (Puts a napkin down and she sets her cup down.)

(Mood shifts to grilling interrogator) A portion of his plantation was to be turned over to you, Mrs. Maslow, upon his death. But of course you already knew that.

Mrs. Maslow: Slander, pure and simple! I will not endure it without another cubed sugar. (Butler hands her another sugar cube and she takes a sip) Thank you.

Butler: You're most welcome. (Shifts back to interrogator) As I was saying . . .

General Applesby: Yes, just what are you trying to say?

Butler: Mrs. Maslow is after the Count's nuts!

(A general uproar is heard throughout the room. Dr. Dandy sneezes and the lights go out. The lights come up and Mrs. Maslow is lying on the floor dead)

Mr. Maslow: Madeline! My dear sweet rose!

Butler: Hmmm. I'm usually right in these cases. Sir, I apologize. My accusations of your wife being an avaricious harlot have proved to be a tad inaccurate.

Mr. Maslow: A most understandable folly, good butler. You served your Count and my wife well.

General Applesby: Astounding!

Dr. Dandy: What is it, General?

General: My rubix cube. I kept it with me and have been attempting to solve it for years. Just before the lights ceased I had been working on it, and whence the light turned on it was solved!

Dr. Dandy: (Looking at the handkerchief in his hand) Also amazing! Just before the lights went out a sneeze seized upon my nose. As the lights returned I found this handkerchief in my hand! (Blows his nose)

Mr. Maslow: (Picks up a poker and probes his wife's body) She is most dead. My sweet (Another jab of the poker) Madeline. (He then grabs the checkbook from her and puts it into his coat and takes off her jewelry and also stuffs it in his pocket.)

Dr. Dandy: If I may interject. I contend that my original theory is the correct one. The seemingly dim-witted ghost, upon hearing our insults, set out to kill the Count and Mrs. Maslow, thus demonstrating its average to above average intelligence and preserving its dignity and good name among his kin. As the Butler himself said, this manor has seen the death of many men great and old.

General Applesby: Enough of your tomfoolery! We've heard quite enough about your mentally handicapped specters. This is neither the work of thick-skulled spooks or autistic leprechauns!

Butler: The General is quite right. This malice was done by the hand of a man as evidenced by all the women present being dead.

Mr. Maslow: Like my wife!

(All scowl at Mr. Maslow))

Butler: Quite right, Mr. Maslow. The marks around Mrs. Maslow's neck indicate she was strangled by a man with powerful hands.

Mr. Maslow: Thank my stars. 'Tis a good day to be limp wristed!

Butler: Looks can be deceiving.

General Applesby: I must excuse myself to the loo as I've consumed a large quantity of tea this evening.

Dr. Dandy: As have we all. I say we should all be excused and reconvene and solve this pickle in due course.

Mr. Maslow: Most prudent!

Butler: No one is going anywhere. I had previously concocted a plan to solve this mystery once and for all. After the first murder, I took to my wits and locked all doors to this room. No one will leave for relief until the murderer confesses his crime as I have hidden the key.

General Applesby: Unfair! You are also a suspect.

Butler: And I will remain here with you all until the confession.

Mr. Maslow: But you have not consumed a vast quantity of tea as have we. Where is your torture? Where's your persuasion for confession?

Butler: I assure you my bladder is enduring the same pressure as I drank two cups of coffee an hour previous.

Dr. Dandy: I think some proof is in order!

Butler: How am I to prove my bladder?

General Applesby: I concur. Some proof is definitely in order.

Mr. Maslow: Crackerjack idea! The proof is in the pudding, I say.

Butler: Have you all gone stupid!?

Dr. Dandy: It is simple. Thrust your hips to and fro and I will place my ear near your bladder. If what you say is true, I should hear a quantity of swishing and swashing.

Butler: To and fro?

General Applesby: Indeed! As if you were in the moment of maximum excitement!

Butler: How lewd.

Mr. Maslow: It's easy. (Thrusts hips back and forth) No harm in it at all, old boy.

General Applesby: To ease your embarrassment we shall join you as the good doctor listens.

(The three of them begin thrusting their hips back in forth in unison as if in some strange, ritualistic dance as the doctor puts his ear near the Butler's lower abdomen)

Dr. Dandy: Yes! Yes! Truth is on his side.

(They all stop)

Dr. Dandy: Distinctly I heard two swishes and a swash.

Butler: A test of wills. We wait until the body puts such a strain as to force a confession from the murderer.

(They all sit down)

Mr. Maslow: I must say, I find the sight of two bodies lying on the floor before us most obscene and unpleasant.

Dr. Dandy: Most.

General Applesby: Quite macabre.

Dr. Dandy: I propose we pile them in the corner and leave them to their own devices.

Mr. Maslow: Practical as always, doctor. I believe my wife would want us to carry on and not let her decaying cadaver spoil the party. After all, the stench would damper the congenial mood.

Dr. Dandy: Agreed. Making our friends party poopers . . . dead party poopers, is no way to honor their memory.

Butler: It is decided then. Make haste all and grab a corpse!

(They clumsily pick up the bodies and carelessly put them in the corner)

Mr. Maslow: Oh!

General Applesby: What is it?

Mr. Maslow: The Count's eyes. His eyes are now open and now gaze upon me in a most strange fashion. I feel most uneasy.

Butler: (Grabs a book) Here. It was the Count's favorite.

(Mr. Maslow puts the book over the Count's head covering his eyes)

Butler: (carrying a tray) Crackers anyone!?

Dr. Dandy: Yes, please!

General Applesby: Most kind.

Mr. Maslow: Absolutely starving!

(They take crackers off the Butler's tray and eat over the bodies)

General Applesby: I've been thinking. I have read in various literature that the most responsible thing to do, in situations similar to our own, is to call the police and let the justice system

investigate the crime through the discovery of evidence which would thereby find the real murderer and allow a jury of peers to exact a sentence. What say you?

(Pause)

All: *laughter*

Dr. Dandy: I see the General has retained his wit.

General Applesby: *Nervous chuckle* Yes, most . . . humorous.

Dr. Dandy: On a more serious note. I had thought about the possibility of the police getting involved and have devised a stratagem. We say synchronized death syndrome.

Mr. Maslow: Synchronized death syndrome?

Dr. Dandy: Yes! Think of a yawn. When one yawns and another is there to witness, that other person is thereby unconsciously moved to yawn himself. The same theory here only instead of yawning, someone is moved to die. The Count died, thereby putting a hypnotic suggestion into Mrs. Maslow's mind and she died soon after.

(All are silent in disbelief)

General Applesby: Lunacy! What manner of ape would believe such nonsense!

Dr. Dandy: We are rich! Therefore our opinions are of more value than the common man. In fact, I will simply point out that I have more money than Sir Isaac Newton and Mozart ever had combined! What does that say about my intelligence?

(More silence)

Mr. Maslow: (Comes out of a trance of deep thought) Huzzah! I've solved the mystery! I know who the murderer is!

Butler: Spit it out then, man! Waste no more breath!

Mr. Maslow: The Count is the murderer! He killed my wife!

General Applesby: That makes absolutely no sense! How could he have killed your wife as he died before her!

Mr. Maslow: Precisely the way he planned it. Death: the perfect alibi!

Dr. Dandy: You nitwit! It is best you keep silent.

Mr. Maslow: Perhaps you are the murderer then. You seem to be a man of a desperate mind.

Dr. Dandy: I have not a murdering bone in my body.

General Applesby: Civility, gentlemen. Let's have a seat and act like respectable possible murderers.

Mr. Maslow: Very well.

Dr. Dandy: Brilliant idea.

(They all sit down)

Butler: To pass the time, general, would you be interested in telling one of your war stories?

General Applesby: I suppose it would help pass the time.

Mr. Maslow: Of course it would. Do humor us.

General Applesby: Very well. My regiment was dispatched to central Asia on a mission to put down a local rebellion. Our advance was halted by a fast-flowing river whose bridge was taken out by the rebels. The river *overflowed* its mighty banks. We could all hear the waterfall downstream as the *water* forcefully moved past each jagged rock!

(All squirm and sigh and sit with their legs tightly crossed)

Dr. Dandy: (obvious discomfort) Yes, can you please move along.

General Applesby: We attempted to repair the dam but the water kept *bursting forth!*

(Everyone squirms uncomfortably in their chairs as their faces turn red)

Mr. Maslow: Enough of the dam. Who did you kill?

General Applesby: That was the thing. By the time we arrived the rebels had relieved themselves . . . of their posts.

Mr. Maslow: Enough of that. Haven't you ever fought in the desert?

General Applesby: Oh yes.

Butler: Tell us about that.

Dr. Dandy: Yes, tell us how dry it was!

General Applesby: Morocco was our destination. We left Liverpool aboard a leaky ship . . .

All: No!

Dr. Dandy: We've changed our minds.

General Applesby: You have?

Mr. Maslow: Yes! We just remembered that we regard your war stories as incredibly boring.

General Applesby: I had no idea. Perhaps you can tell us more about your nightmares. Regale us with horrifying dreams of you having to wipe your own hindquarters!

Butler: Gentlemen! Cease hostilities as it may rouse the murderer to kill again.

(Enter the Countess Macadamia with a key in her hand as she tucks it away)

Countess: Why was the door locked? What is going on here? Who are you people?

Butler: Countess! What a pleasant surprise. What brings you back?

Countess: The Count sent an urgent letter insisting I come at once. Where is he, good Butler?

Butler: I know not.

Countess: Isn't that the Count over there in the corner?

Butler: Well . . .

Dr. Dandy: If I may. Any naturalist will tell you, Countess, that that over there is a mirage. An indoor mirage brought about by misty steam and pixy dew. Let us admire its splendid . . . miragyness . . . for a brief moment and retire to the dining hall.

(She approaches the pile)

Countess: No, it's quite solid! It certainly looks like the Count!

Butler: (Looks at the Count's body closely) Hmm. You know, now that I think about it, he looks surprisingly similar to the Count, yes.

Countess: It is! And he's lying atop of some woman!

Butler: So careless! Hours spent laboriously reading must have sent him straight to sleep.

(She approaches the Count's body and all of them appeared mortified. She picks the book from his head.)

Countess: *The Prunes of Revenge*. He cherished this book above all else as it was the only copy of Steinbeck's failed "Grapes of Wrath" sequel.

Butler: Oh yes. It was near to his heart. Shall we take turns reading?

Dr. Dandy: Yes, let us allow the Count to have his rest and we will go into the dining hall . . .

Countess: Why have his eyes remained open so grotesquely?

Dr. Dandy: He's happy to see you! Even sleep cannot stop his admiring eyes! (Grabs the Countess's hand) Wave to him. Now shall we retire to the dining hall?

Countess: To me he appears dead.

Butler: Not at all.

General Applesby: No!

Dr. Dandy: Restful I'd say.

Butler: Yes, restful is the word.

Mr. Maslow: My wife, the corpse beneath him, is the dead one. You may blame her for the Count's mimicry.

(All groan in anger at Mr. Maslow)

General Applesby: (to Mr. Maslow) Maslow, you fool!

Countess: So what I'm hearing and understanding is this: the Count came into this room, unbothered by the dead woman's presence; he picked up the book and decided to enjoy a leisurely reading by resting upon her festering body where he made sure to fall asleep with his eyes open to greet me when I arrived?

Dr. Dandy: Yes! When you say it like that it sounds most logical.

Countess: No it doesn't! That is most insane! Being the Countess of a premiere nut plantation does not mean I was birthed from a nut. A conspiracy is afoot and I will have answers!

Butler: In all honesty we must tell you the truth. The Count threw a party for his friends but things went afoul. In the course of the evening the lights malfunctioned twice, each time producing a murder. Your Count was the first to feel the sting of death by a poker to the head. I locked us in here until one of us confessed to the crime. We are all possible filthy murderers. (Gesturing to the three men)

Dr. Dandy: (Steps up quickly) Hello, nice to meet you. I am Dr. Randall Dandy. I am a professor of high philosophy at the University of Doctors over in West Docketville. (Shakes the Countess's hand)

Countess: Charmed I'm sure.

General Applesby: A pleasure. I'm the Count's old sergeant from way back when we were both young and spry. The name is Chester Applesby.

Countess: The pleasure is all mine, Mr. Applesby.

Mr. Maslow: Greetings, Countess. I'm Hunter Maslow. Even though I am 1/4 of a chance to be the merciless slaughterer of your husband, I want you to feel at ease and have tea with us, would you?

Countess: Delighted! (She puts the book back on the Count's face and the Butler pours her a cup) I propose a toast. To the gracious non murderers, how you make the presence of one ruthless, detestable animal a mere inconvenience.

Mr. Maslow: Do not take offense if we do not join you in tea.

Countess: So, no one has of yet confessed?

Dr. Dandy: Not a one. However, my intuition feels it coming soon. (Winces in pain) There is a curious thing about the two murders, Countess. After the lights returned, compliments were paid. Mrs. Maslow found her checkbook balanced, the General's rubix cube solved and a handkerchief for me after I sneezed.

Countess: Oh! A gentleman murderer.

Dr. Dandy: Do you believe in spirits, madam?

General Applesby: Oh not this ghost business again! Hogwash!

Countess: Be still, General. A highly educated doctor of high philosophy may shed light on this matter.

Dr. Dandy: As we heard noises previous to the murders, I offhandedly made references to the dim-witted apparition. I now believe we have a spirit at work here slaughtering the guests and intent on disproving its idiocy.

General Applesby: (To Butler) There's definitely someone here that's dim witted but it isn't the ghost.

Countess: And you have a plan?

Butler: (sarcastically) Doesn't he always.

Dr. Dandy: We litter the room with jigsaw puzzles, riddles, crosswords and income tax forms. The ghost will be utterly occupied, giving us time to drink the tea, and eat the delicious barbecue sauced wieners promised us in the invitation.

Mr. Maslow: A fine plan, doctor! Sauced wieners, here, here! (Claps hands and stops when he notices no one joining in)

General Applesby: You've gone mad! Are you proposing that this idiot ghost is going to do my taxes while I sit here eating cocktail wieners?

Dr. Dandy: Shhhh. Please refer to it as the "above average intelligence ghost" lest one more will be slain in its wake.

General Applesby: Are you hearing this? This fool has been educated beyond his intelligence!

Countess: Doctor, although I believe your plan has merit, I think it would be wise to figure out the nature of the murderer. Else, if we reason falsely the murderer would make his escape with us and bring his reign of polite terror to the outside.

Butler: An idea is upon me.

Mr. Maslow: Yes, one of us must be trusted to leave and obtain the sauced wieners.

Butler: No! My idea is a gentlemen's agreement. Until the murder is solved, we all promise not to murder anyone if the lights should go out again.

Mr. Maslow: A wonderful idea. Everyone, come put your hands into the circle.

Butler: Repeat after me: on my word as a gentleman, I promise not to kill anyone eh . . . from now on.

All: On my word as a gentleman, I promise not to kill anyone from now on.

Mr. Maslow: Much better. I feel most comfortable already.

(Lights go out. There is a lot of shuffling)

Mr. Maslow: Offense! I spoke too soon!

Dr. Dandy: Then stop speaking!

Butler: (Like a mother) Remember now, whatever you do, don't kill anyone. I will be most cross if . . .

General Applesby: Oh! Oh! I am being accosted! Desist or I will be forced to defend myself, villain!

(More shuffling is heard as the lights eventually turn back on. The General still has his eyes closed and is loosely slapping his hands at empty air. Mr. Maslow is lying dead on the floor. All look at him stunned).

Butler: Oh crap.

(Countess goes and checks Mr. Maslow's body for a pulse)

Countess: He's been killed by a blow to the head. The poker lies next to his body.

General Applesby: (Feels his eyebrows) Mercy! My once united eye brow has now been . . .

Dr. Dandy: Divided!

Countess: But Mr. Maslow . . .

General Applesby: Countess, please! My eyebrow has been raped!

Dr. Dandy: (Looking at the General's new eyebrows) Extraordinary. A vast improvement.

Countess: But what of Mr. Maslow?

Butler: Countess, you really should come take a look at the fine trim of these eye brows.

Countess: I mean, what are we going to do with his body?

Dr. Dandy: Pile it in the corner with the rest I should think.

(They drag Mr. Maslow to the corner)

Countess: What I should like to know is why you all decided to lock yourselves in this room and not think to remove all possible weapons?

(They look at each other in embarrassment and shame)

Butler: (Turns to Applesby and Dr. Dandy) *Cough* More crackers?

Applesby/Dandy: Yes! Yes!

(Countess retrieves all the pokers and opens the door and sets them outside. She comes back and locks the door.)

Countess: This confession best come soon.

General Applesby: No doubt it will.

Butler: Agreed. The pressure is mounting.

(All standing they wince in pain and cross their legs.)

Countess: I need some tea to calm my nerves. (She takes a glass)

Butler: Allow me to pour your tea, madam.

Countess: No thank you, it is no burden. (She proceeds to put her cup down and raise the tea pot high above the cup. She pours slowly, increasing and decreasing the stream's vertical length. The men are watching and their pains have doubly increased.)

Dr. Dandy: I can't stand it!

Countess: What is the matter with you?

General Applesby: Enough is enough! My limits have been reached.

Butler: As have mine!

Countess: What has gotten into you all? (She continues to pour)

General Applesby: Unbearable torture!

(Countess takes a sip and slurps)

Applesby, Butler, Dandy: I confess!

Countess: Three confessors?

(All begin talking and no one can be distinguished)

Countess: Everyone cease speaking. One confession at a time. Everyone please sit down and we shall do this like nobility.

(They all raise their hands like school children)

Countess: (Points to General Applesby) You there, what is your confession?

General Applesby: I killed Mrs. Maslow.

(All are stunned)

Countess: Why did you kill her?

General Applesby: Every week we gather here and have our little parties and every week we have to listen to Mrs. Maslow's inane stories.

Butler: Why did you not simply ask her to stop telling stories?

General Applesby: That, sir, would be rude. I am a gentleman. Mrs. Maslow suffered no offense by me.

Dr. Dandy: Up until the point where you strangled the life out of her?

General Applesby: Indeed! No offense at all. She left this world with her pride and self esteem in tact. Mrs. Maslow would be most satisfied if she knew she was being brutally slain by the hands of a gentleman.

Countess: Thank you, General Applesby.

(Butler and Dr. Dandy raise their hands up)

Countess: Give us your confession, Butler.

Dr. Dandy: But my hand was the first risen! I protest.

Countess: Patience, doctor. Your confession will be saved for last.

Dr. Dandy: *Mumbles something about always being chosen last*

Butler: I will confess that I killed no one.

Dr. Dandy: That's it? You chose his confession first over mine simply to have him say he did not kill anyone!

Butler: Let me finish.

Dr. Dandy: By all means.

Butler: I haven't killed anyone but I do share a hand in this. Every time the lights went out I corrected certain wrongs . . .

General Applesby: Such as . . . ?

Butler: Such as your rubix cube, the handkerchief and balancing Mrs. Maslow's checkbook.

General Applesby: And my once mighty Pangaea eye brow?

Butler: Also my doing. You see, ever since my boyhood I've had a compulsive eye for perfection. It has gone as far as obsession. It is my nature that I can't allow disorder of any sort.

Dr. Dandy: Boring, boring, boring.

General Applesby: You're just mad that your idiot ghost proved nothing more than your plentiful brain droppings.

Dr. Dandy: Hardly. May I make my confession, Countess?

Countess: Please do.

Dr. Dandy: I killed the Duchess of Dour, in the parlor with a shower pouf.

(All gasp and whisper among themselves)

Countess: Who? I believe you are confused.

Dr. Dandy: I am? (Takes out his day planner) Oh! Sorry about that. I was looking at next week in my day planner. (Takes another look) Yes, the Duchess is next week because I am scheduled to swim naked in my money next Tuesday. I ask all of you to please ignore my previous confession.

Butler: Forgiven and forgotten.

General Applesby: Ancient history. Please proceed.

Dr. Dandy: (with an almost childish sense of excitement) I killed Mr. Maslow!
(All gasp and whisper among themselves)

Butler: Why did you do such a thing? We made a gentlemen's agreement that no one was to kill anyone!

Dr. Dandy: Very true, however, I did it for the good of us all.

General Applesby: How so?

Dr. Dandy: Mr. Maslow was a dunderhead and would have given us away to the authorities. I assure you it was not in malice as I was thinking happy thoughts as I mercilessly clubbed him over the head with the poker.

General Applesby: That was most brutal and odious of you.

Butler: Most.

Dr. Dandy: Wait a moment. No need to think ill of me, I assure you. I was planning to write a murder mystery novel for quite some time. I had always wanted it to be based on a true story and was presented the opportunity tonight.

Countess: A book? You were planning on killing someone just to make your book true?

Dr. Dandy: Again, no need to think ill of me. I most certainly intend, with some of the proceeds of the book sales, to open up a crisis center in Mr. Maslow's honor. How does this sound: The Mr. Maslow Institute for Those Bludgeoned to Death with a Poker.

(A pause)

Butler: Rolls off the tongue quite well.

Countess: An intellectual and philanthropist! I applaud your generosity.

General Applesby: A most noble gesture!

Dr. Dandy: (Adoring the attention) I thought so. I may even dedicate a flag pole in his remembrance!

General Applesby: One moment. If I killed *Mrs.* Maslow and the doctor killed *Mr.* Maslow, who killed the Count?

(All turn their heads toward the Butler)

Butler: It t'was not me! We shared the same affections.

Countess: What?!

Butler: The same lifestyle.

General Applesby: Come again?

Butler: We swung the same way.

Dr. Dandy: Are you trying to say that you and the Count were . . .

Butler: Lovers . . .

(All cry in shock)

Butler: Of cricket!

Dr. Dandy: Is that what they are calling it these days?

Butler: The count and I share a passion for the game. Every day in the summer we go out and play and are in the inter-dukedom league together. As you see, I could never kill my best friend and cricket mate.

General Applesby: But if none of us killed the Count, then that means . . .

(They look at the Countess)

Dr. Dandy: The Count is not dead! Quick, help me wake him up! (Runs over to the Count's body and starts slapping his face) Come around now, the jest is over! (Starts shaking his shoulders)

(All look in disbelief at the Doctor's lunacy)

Countess: I assure you the count is dead. (Dr. Dandy lets go of the Count and he drops to the floor like a rock. Dr. Dandy wipes his hands on his clothes) I killed him.

General You . . .

Dr. Dandy: Killed the Count?

Butler, Dandy, Applesby: *Laughter*

Dr. Dandy: A woman committing a murder! Ha!

Countess: You don't believe me?

General Applesby: A woman is a fine creature, sure enough, but lacks the audacity and strength of will of a man.

(Countess approaches the light switch)

Butler: Yes, he did not die of nagging, Countess! The joke is up.

Dr. Dandy: Yes, be serious. You move us all to tears and we have not the boating equipment!

Butler, Dandy, Applesby: *Laughter*

General Applesby: I suppose your motive was spawned of a broken nail! Ha!

(Looks to the others and they laugh)

(Countess shuts off the lights)

Dr. Dandy: Oh! Oh! Keep her away!

General Applesby: Keep together! Strength in numbers, I say!

(Countess turns the lights back on and the Butler and General Applesby and embracing each other as Dr. Dandy is on the ground hugging the General's leg. They stand up in embarrassment and collect themselves.)

Countess: A tissue, Doctor?

Dr. Dandy: Yes, yes. My eyes seem to be perspiring from the heat. (The General puts the Doctor's head on his shoulder)

General Applesby: Yes, the tea . . . all the tea we drank put our nerves on edge. That's it.

Butler: Why did you do it?

Countess: I have been estranged from Count Macadamia for years living in North Hampershire. The Earl of Cashews has been courting me for some time and I decided to accept his proposal for marriage. There was only one obstacle. The Count would not grant me a divorce as his letter to me stated. I formulated a plan and arrived two days early to catch Count Macadamia off guard. I was not, however, aware of his party plans with you all. I apologize for disturbing your evening.

General Applesby: No trouble at all.

Dr. Dandy: So you callously slaughtered your husband!

Countess: Indeed!

General Applesby: Good for you for having the drive and initiative to pursue your dreams.

Countess: Thank you.

Dr. Dandy: What of the lights, though?

Countess: Upon arriving I attempted to rig the electrical system. In the course of tampering with it I damaged it and I believe it now turns on and off from malfunction.

Butler: The mystery is solved! Gentlemen, I believe we have some business to attend to.

General Applesby: Oh yes!

Dr. Dandy: Countess, whence I complete my book I shall be sure to furnish you with a copy. I shall call it *Count Macadamia, the Mentally Challenged Ghost, and a Series of Polite Murders*. In fact, a signed copy for all!

Countess: I look forward to it. Thank you everyone, both alive and dead, for coming. Do come again next week for tea.

General Applesby: Most certainly.

Dr. Dandy: I would not miss it for the world. And this time, I promise I shall not kill anyone!

Butler: Ha! You rascal!

Countess: Ha ha ha. Your sense of humor is as fresh as a baby's velveteen buttocks, doctor.

Dr. Dandy: I have been compared to worse!

(The Countess unlocks the door for them)

General Applesby: Gentlemen, fall in line! To the loo!

Butler: To the loo!

Dr. Dandy: To the loo!

Butler: Lead the way, my general!

Countess: Butler!

Butler: Yes, countess?

Countess: Be sure to have the maid straighten this room when she comes this morning. The Earl wishes to entertain guests.

Butler: As you wish. Countess?

Countess: Yes?

Butler: What of the bodies?

Countess: Yes, they are a bit of a distraction. We should dispose of them.

Butler: As it is the end of my shift, I will have to leave a note for the maid. (Picks up sticky note pad and writes) Dear maid . . . dead bodies . . . please dispose of them . . . terribly sorry for inconvenience. Lamb thawing in fridge. (Slaps note on the pile of bodies) I will be off then.

Countess: Good, good. Have a pleasant day, butler.
(They both proceed to exit)

Countess: Are you fond of the Earl's nuts?

Butler: Cashews . . . yes, quite.
(Countess turns the lights out and they all exit)

The End

* Suffering emotional stress from being bludgeoned with a fire poker? Call the Mr. Maslow Institute for Those Bludgeoned to Death with a Poker at 1-800-MOSTRUDE. Operators are standing by.

The Woman

by *Angela Uwadiogwu*

One

Everyone said she was mad, and she might have well been. Roaming around the village with her brown sack over her shoulders, she knocked from door to door, begging whoever answered it for a loaf of bread, and some more time to do it.

Do what? The door person sometimes asked. She would give no answers, but stare into the distance and keep at it, begging for food and requesting for more time. Sometimes, when she was lucky, a piece of bread came in handy and upon polite request she left; most times, brash, impatient people denied her food, pushed her away and warned her never to set foot again on wherever she stood. Her presence, so known that the villagers complained to the authorities to do something about the situation, had caused a lot of outrage. The villagers agreed that she was danger, a potential threat to children and other innocents. Nothing was done about her in actuality. And afterward, the spontaneity, the excitement, the protests, died out. She became another part of community. Her walking from door to door, her continuous murmurs of her need for food, her whole being, they accepted, they familiarized themselves with.

The woman wore rags. Brown, torn, tarnished remnants of clothing probably expensive in neater, newer times before. Her ripped skirt did nothing to cover her muddied thighs, calves and ankles, and the flies from nearby gutters and preying eyes feasted on her legs as she walked about unknowingly. Her bare breasts and back, to the disappointment of those who furtively watched her, hid behind the grimy walls of mud and gutter build-up. And her feminine crest, her hair, dreadlocks fattened with sweet wrappers and moist sand, evoked a sight and stench as repelling as what she ought to have been.

She ought to have been like the other maundering lunatics—wild, unpredictable, and given to fits of ferocious laughter and still sullenness. But her docility, her silence even as she moved or spoke, defied all the rules. Her physical carriage was enviable; she walked like a woman who knew her assets. And save for her unkempt skin and hair, she looked good. One could still make out the aristocratic nose and pouty lips from her sooty face, but it was her eyes that captured the mind most. Grey, alien, thoughtful even in madness. A well sculpted female too, people acknowledged. And she was often compared to a clay statue, her body being so well formed and yet covered in muddiness. Some people suggested the possibility of her not being Nigerian because of these.

Secretly, and ironically, the villagers developed a respect for this woman who minded her business except when she was hungry. No one referred to her as mad or *onye ara*. They called her *the woman*- the only name seen as fitting for her.

Two

The two men stared at her from the verandah of a bungalow, their big and greedy eyes watching the steps of her bare feet, the flex of her thigh and calf muscles as she bent down to scoop the mud water, the flutter of her lips as she slurped the rotten drink of the road, the way her body shook as she drank, how she was oblivious to the people who walked past, hissing and shaking their heads in pity. Her hair fell over her back and shoulders, and overcome with how beautifully distant she was, they shook their heads in amazement. The skies above were as grey as

her eyes, only darker, and rain wind scattered across the small bushes at the corners and the hung clothes outside.

“Unbelievable.” The bigger one of the two bit at his kola nut as he stared. “You know, if that woman weren’t out of this world, I would have tried my luck in marrying her. Look at her... it’s as if she were a born dancer of some sort.”

“Sopulu!” The other man exclaimed through fits of laughter, “I’ve always known you to have strange ways, but what you have just said is as mad as she is. Don’t let other people hear of this. If they do, you know what would happen.”

Sopulu stared at his best friend, torn between annoyance and amusement. “What mad thing have I said? Tell me, what? Is she not enjoyable to look at? Even you stare at her, and yet you talk as if you are wise. I’m just a braver man, I say what I think, and I don’t care what anyone would see me as. You, on the other hand, are a different story. Yes, I proclaim it—if that woman were cured of her madness, I will make plans to claim her!”

Chieze feigned shock as he laughed, but deep in his heart he had a soft spot for the woman, and sometimes wished she was not crazy, so that he could have her for himself. But he knew that if not for her madness, she wouldn’t be in this village in the first place. She looked and sounded like one from a city, if not from outside the country itself. Fate had not intended her to be with any man from here, and it never would.

The sweetness of his former gaiety melted, and he stopped laughing altogether.

“Her skin is very ugly,” he said meekly, eyes still hovering over the woman, who stood and dusted her behind and her brown, dirty sack. She went a little further down the road before sitting at the side, by the bushes. From afar, her grey eyes were luminously evident as she turned her face around wildly. This frightened the men, but they were still entranced, and kept watching.

“Her skin is ugly, I agree with you, but what her skin lacks, the form of her being and her gait make up for.”

She began to sing. The men couldn’t make out the words of her song, but from afar it was audible. Her voice, though not astounding to the ears, was still something. Clear, feminine, and pleasant.

It took great effort, but the men averted their eyes, and discussed deeply about their plans for that night.

Three

The rain fell heavily that night, pelting harshly against the red earth as the pace of the wind increased. The roads were vacuous, laundered clothes hanging from the ropes had found their way inside by caring, household hands. The windows of little houses around, illuminated by candle lights and lamps, shone dimly over the dark streets and bushes, slightly glistening the moist grasses and soaked roads. From inside, one could make out the trees. Their branches and leaves faced downward in abject mourning as the leaden rain hit them mercilessly. There was no thunder, no lightning—just the incessant weeping of the rain and the whistle of the air. Silence swam with the wind as an invisible pall settled in the skies and below it.

The grasses shuffled as two tiny head lamps moved past. Fast rhythm of footsteps, drowned by the intense noise of the downpour, stopped suddenly.

Chieze had almost slipped and fell on the wet earth for the umpteenth time, and cursing in anger, dropped the load that he and Sopulu carried under the rain.

“What now?” Sopulu asked in annoyance, almost screaming over the pelt and howl of the cloudburst. Drenched in rain water, he felt his clothes tighten against his skin. He could make out his friends facial grimace from his head lamp, and knew the man was going to complain.

“I’m tired! I’m tired! Let’s go back and hide him in your farmland and come back tomorrow night. This rain is only making things harder for us!”

“No. We have to finish this tonight! We have gone too far to turn back now, and you know as well as I do that the rain is to our advantage.”

Both men stood, looking down at the load that could change their lives forever. Encased, in a large, black cloth, his hands struggled to break from his seamless prison.

“He is still alive,” Sopulu said. “He might escape if we hide him. No, we must do whatever we have to do tonight.”

With reluctance, Chieze bent over and lifted the legs of the load from the ground, and Sopulu brought up the shoulders.

“Okay, let us move on.”

The two men struggled against the wind and rain, carrying their precious possession to their planned destination—somewhere within the outskirts of Umuenu, their village.

It took a long while, and a very good show of strength—their load was big boned—but they got there eventually.

Their planned place was a little uninhabited thatched roof hut in the middle of an expanse of land. On the entering the hut, Chieze let go of the legs and leaned his back on a wall while trying to catch his breath.

Sopulu laughed as he laid the load properly on the ground. “You, you are too soft to be a man. So carrying a child is what is making you upset, eh?”

Chieze eyed his friend and hissed. “Listen, let’s do what we came here to do and go back to our houses in peace.”

His companion shrugged, a smile evident on his face. Wiping the wetness from his brows, he squatted and faced his head lamp on the encased load, staring at it while it struggled weakly to be free. “Okay. Hand me the knife.”

Chieze dug into the sides of his trousers, his back against the wall, and brought out the knife.

Four

Both men stared at the knife. The metal shone in the slightly illuminated darkness, proudly, yet discreetly asserting that it was the last key to their try at success in the world. “Here,” Chieze said, stretching over to hand the knife to his friend. “You know. Ten years ago, I would never have thought I would resolve to this sort of a thing.”

Sopulu sighed and spoke: “That is life, my brother. Things and situations change, and we have to change too if we want to survive. We had ideals, dreams of the way life should accept us, and make us. But they are gone, and we are still here, wasting away in this God forsaken village. We have no money to raise a family of our own, and people mock us behind our backs. But, my friend, things are going to change from this point onward. This life here we are sacrificing is only for the benefit of other lives to come—the lives of our future wives and children. We must do what we must do. Remember, the priestess told us that if the sacrifice goes smoothly, we will be on our way to Lagos, and then the money will come in abundance. Our prestige and respect will return to us in hundred fold.”

At his own words, a certain amount of courage filled him. He took the knife from Chieze with gusto, and cut open the wrapped cloth, taking care not to slash any part of the load. Out came the semi-conscious face of the boy, gasping for air, and his weak, naked, body, shivering against the cold.

“Please... *biko*, don’t do anything to me. Please... I want to go home.” The boy mumbled the words weakly, and began to sob.

Chieze began to have a change of heart. “Maybe we shouldn’t do it. I mean, he’s only a small boy.”

Sopulu dropped the knife in annoyance. “Look, don’t start your show of cowardice. Let’s just do this thing and deliver the head to the priestess. We have come too far to go back now. Don’t you want to be rich anymore? Do you not want the honor you have been craving all your years as a man? The chieftaincy titles? The women, cars—so you are giving up because one child we don’t even know is begging for mercy? Are you a weakling? Besides, if we let the boy go he will tell others.”

“I just don’t think—”

“Chieze, you’re making me angry. Maybe you would like to take the boy’s place!”

The slight shuffle of feet against the mud floor of the hut halted the argument. Sopulu dropped his knife and looked around. And Chieze’s eyes widened in surprise.

Five

The woman casually entered the hut, drenched from the rain but oblivious to it and her surroundings, and sat on the floor before digging into her shrunken sack. She blinked her eyes rapidly and smiled when her hands extracted a broken piece of a plate.

The two men stared at her blankly, and then faced each other.

“What are we going to do?” Chieze whispered, a wave of panic taking control over him.

Sopulu himself was confused, but he made a good show of hiding it. He picked up his knife and placed it on the throat of the boy. “We continue. After all, she’s a crazy woman, and wouldn’t even know what and where she is. Her being here is mere coincidence.”

“A coincidence? No, I don’t think so. This hut is a long distance from the main village, and I have never seen her leave the village since she first showed up. How can she be here tonight of all nights, under this heavy rain?”

“Mad people don’t have destinations. They go wherever their empty heads lead them. If it will make things better for us, we’ll kill her after we finish. Now keep quiet and let me concentrate.”

Unheeding the final pleas of the boy, Sopulu slit his throat, and stretched the opened neck to release the spurting blood. He faced the boy’s limp head to the direction of the hut’s entrance so that the blood would flow smoothly out.

Sopulu heard the woman chuckle behind him, and looking at his shaken friend, laughed.

“You see? She even laughs as I do this. Just to show you that lunatics live up to their name.”

Chieze kept his eyes closed, his lips clamped together as he tried to block out the image of the knife slitting the boy’s throat from his head. He felt a wave of nausea engulf his stomach, but held it down, afraid to show his friend that he was soft at heart. What bothered him more was Sopulu’s decision to have the woman killed. Why should she die because she simply appeared while they devising this scheme? She didn’t even know what she was, where she was.

“Chieze, come over here and help me. Take that piece of wood over there. The one at the opposite end of us, and bring it here.”

He opened his eyes quickly, as if he awoke from a nightmare. He walked over to piece of wood at the other end of the wall, picked it up, and faced his best friend.

“You think we should kill her?” he asked, hands wiping at the wood.

“What else? Hurry up, I need that piece of wood to hit the knife at the bony areas.”

Chieze nodded and handed the piece of wood to Sopulu, watching him as he worked on removing the limp head of the little boy. Sopulu did this with a strange, nonchalant calm, as though he was carving a statue out of a piece of wood.

The woman stared on before her, mumbling to herself unassumingly.

“I’m finished!” Sopulu exclaimed. From his pocket, he removed a large waterproof bag and gingerly lifted the head, placing it carefully in the bag

Chieze’s eyes never left the woman. He sighed, and tears stung his eyes.

Sopulu wiped his soaked hands on his shirt “All this blood is beginning to irritate me. I’ll have a serious bath when I get home.”

Chieze said nothing.

“Well?” Sopulu asked “What are you waiting for?”

Chieze was puzzled “How do you mean?”

“Take the knife and kill her! You think I’ll do it after doing the job on the boy single handedly? You have to kill her yourself.”

“I can’t! You know I can’t!”

Sopulu laughed cruelly. “Really my friend, you are not cut out for things like this. You had better kill her if you want to partake in this wealth I am planning for.”

“You?”

“Yes, me. You haven’t done anything here to really help me, except stand there like a woman and shiver. It is not us working together for this—it is me alone. After all, I was the only one who operated on the boy. It is when you kill that crazy thing over there that I can consider you as my equal.”

Chieze trembled. “It was only this afternoon that you praised her. You even claimed that you would have liked to marry her, save for the fact that she was mad. Now you want her dead.”

“And you want her alive?” Sopulu laughed again, this time louder “You... you want her alive! Yes, yes, life is ironical. You told me my comments were as mad as she was that same afternoon, and now you talk as if you’re in love with her.”

“I am not in love with her and you know it!” But even as Chieze yelled, tears came down from his eyes, and his brows warmed from the throbbing in his head. He was surprised at how overcome with grief he became. But he couldn’t help the feeling.

“If you are not in love with her, then doing what you have to do shouldn’t be so hard. Take the knife and finish her up so that we can leave.”

Sopulu was standing up now, one hand clutching the bag, the other outstretching the knife.

“Take it. There are many fishes in the sea. Surely, when you have enough money, many women would be at your beck and call. Killing a mad woman would not be the death of you; rather, I think it would be redemption. Your apparent show of love unnerves me. Here, take it.”

“I am not in love with her! This is wrong and I cannot do it.”

“No, I think you are. She is something, isn’t she? Beautiful, graceful, the proper lady, even in her condition. Even I have to admit it- when one tastes sweet soup, the appearance of the food itself would no longer matter. But don’t you see? We have no choice. What if she regains her sanity suddenly and remembers this whole thing? Now that would not be good for us, would it? Here, be a man, and take this knife from me.”

Chieze shook as his hand slowly reached to take possession of the knife. He gazed around the hut: his best friend turned monster, the blood, the headless body sprawled on the mud floor, the almost beautiful woman sitting before him, staring into the distant unknown, her lips moving softly. Poor her, unknowing of her inevitable fate.

It looked surreal, as if he were in a dream. But it was sweat on his forehead, the rain outside, the feel of the knife on his hands that proved that everything was the exact otherwise. It was the cold, deathly reality.

He slowly made his way to the woman, heart beating loudly, and rose up the knife.

“Good, very good!” Sopulu cheered on. “Tomorrow you’ll be happy you did this, and grateful to me.”

But suddenly, something else happened. For that moment, her eyes became focused, sharp, and frightened. In a cry she made for the knife from her sitting position and plunged it into Chieze's chest.

He felt burning, sharp pain as it entered through him, and he thought, for a brief moment that those grey eyes glistened with tears.

That was the last thing he ever thought of.

Sopulu watched, standing stock-still. He felt some invisible force from the earth kept him prisoner at his standing point.

The Woman, eyes frightened, body shivering from the cold, rushed toward him with the knife.

And the rain poured on.

Six

The news concerning the bizarre nature of the four deaths spread quickly round Umuenu and its neighboring villages. As the story was told from mouth to mouth, the supposed truth was corrupted in one way or another. Soon enough the sound and richness in the fright of the tale gave out, leaving behind a sequence of incoherent phases that were too incomplete to understand.

This is the way the story is being told now:

One of the farmhands that lived near the border of Umuenu was returning home from his morning stroll, when the stench of the lonely hut nearby engulfed him. Initially, he considered checking the place himself but thought otherwise. He thought it wise to inform his colleagues first, and ask that they come with him to inspect the place, in case whatever lay within the house was too big for one person to handle.

The man left the area, and went over to his friends' houses, imploring them to leave whatever they were attending to and come with him. Now many of his friends refused his request, and wondered why he would call on them at so early a time, but some did come with him, curious as to know what he was talking about.

On arriving at the hut, they were forced to cover their noses. They knew the foul odor of a dead body when they smelt one, but what they saw when they entered the hut was beyond expectation.

The sight shocked and repelled all who saw it. A headless body lay on the ground. Blood spurts daubed the floors and walls. Houseflies and mosquitoes buzzed around the place—and there the woman was, shaken and wide-eyed, clutching to a knife while she sat amidst the bloody scenario.

They didn't notice the two other dead bodies at first—the hut was too dark—but when one of the men accidentally slipped and fell, he screamed. Only then did they see and understand what truly happened.

Another of the men rushed home and brought a gun, and the dangerous lunatic was shot instantly. Such people were not allowed to live.

Most people supported the shooting. She kidnapped the little boy and cut his head off after all, and, adding another nail to her coffin, killed the men that tried to rescue him. It was a just death, the only punishment suitable for so savage a mind.

Very few questioned this. The woman lived amongst the villagers without causing any trouble. She was quiet woman who didn't know anyone, totally lost to the world. But that opinion died out. Mad people, by nature, are usually unpredictable anyway.

Those who knew the two men pondered over their deaths. The head and decapitated body, which were once the young son of a popular land owner, were buried immediately after they were

brought back to home. No intense burial rites or mourning periods were celebrated—they were all very young people who had died in the strangest of conditions.

As for the captivating schizophrenic everyone secretly admired, well, she was a past thoroughly forgotten. But there were those random times—those times when drunkards would gather under the shade of a tree and gossip about women and their little escapades—when the strain of her memory would exhale from the afternoon breeze, and the puddles of mud from the empty, narrow roads. And for this reason, all the merrymaking and drunken laughter emitted into the sunny atmosphere would cease for the moment, emulating that silence the woman was very well known for.